BACK BRAIN RECLUSE

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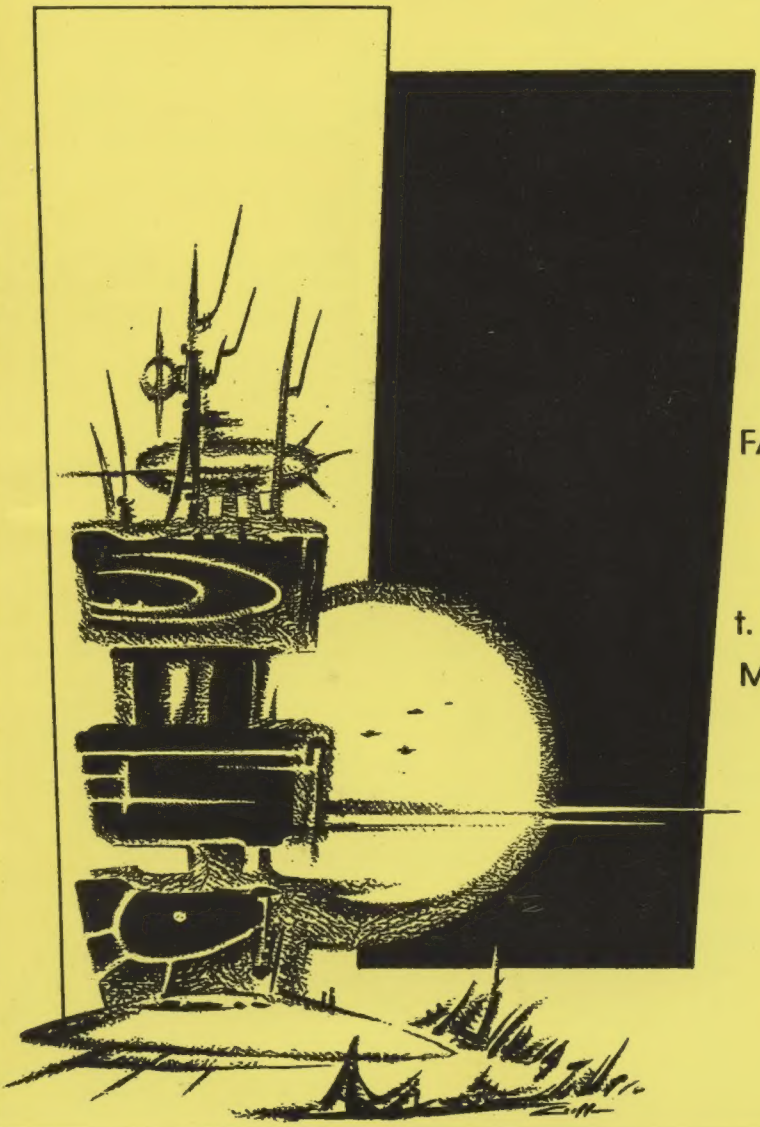
Autumn 1989



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The small press gets its act together

BBR's attendance at Iconoclasm in Leeds last June, proved an interesting and productive affair. Deep within the hordes of Trekkies with laser guns and posing axes was a group of people who came to the convention because of a particular interest in the small press, rather than in the more frivolous side of the activities.

In addition to the **BBR** editors, manning the stall were Kevin Lyons and Dave and Andy of *Works*, assisted over the weekend by Adrian Hodges, Simon Clark, Nick Mahoney and Alan Garside. Ian Brooks, Steve Sneyd, J.F. Haines, Maureen Porter, Andy Darlington, and Andy Eastwood also put in an appearance, whilst Des Lewis and Mark Samuels drove all the way up from South London on the Saturday.

It was of course great to be able to put faces to names during the weekend, but even more profitable was the chance it gave the assembled editors to get their heads together and establish some common ground within the small press. It was decided that existing small press groups were too disparate in nature and interests, and that an organisation dedicated to the individual needs of the SF world was required.

As a result, the New Science Fiction Alliance was born, dedicated to the promotion of excellence in the British SF and fantasy small press. The participating magazines are *Auguries*, **BBR**, *Dream*, *New Visions*, *The Scanner* and *Works*. *The Edge* has also subsequently been incorporated.

Whilst each member magazine retains its autonomy and individual identity, promotion and marketing both in the UK and abroad is taking place under the single banner of the NSFA. Sales at Iconoclasm showed that people like the convenience of being able to buy all the magazines from a single outlet, and – with all the titles available from each member magazine – this is being proven again by the enthusiastic mail order sales already coming through.

Furthermore, specialist distributors Titan have taken the NSFA titles into their own catalogue, which means that you should now be able to obtain **BBR** or any of the other member

magazines through Forbidden Planet or any other specialist bookshop in the country.

The other major achievement of the NSFA so far has been to obtain major US magazines and make them available in the UK at an affordable price, without the inconvenience and unnecessary cost of obtaining dollars to send abroad. Those so far included are *Edge Detector*, *Ellipsis*, *Ice River*, *Jabberwocky*, *New Pathways* and *Space & Time*. See the panel on page 59 for full details.

So, the British small press has got its act together at last, and from what we can see, it's only the tip of the iceberg. Science fiction still has a bad public image thanks to the overbearing influence of the mass media, so it's up to the small press now to take on the task of promoting SF as serious literature. With writers like Lyle Hopwood, Michael Cobley, Simon Clark and S.M. Baxter as proof of the pudding, the small press already plays a key role as the testing ground from where tomorrow's big name writers will be drawn.

There's only so much that the NSFA editors can do on their own, however. I like to think that the quality of content, layout and design that **BBR** has attained over the past four issues means we are now giving the professional magazines on the newsstands a good run for their money.

But a magazine is only as successful as its readers make it. If you as a reader care about **BBR** and want to see it continue to expand and develop, then it is essential that you give us your fullest support.

If you are a casual reader, then please do subscribe; if your subscription expires with this issue, then please renew promptly. Tell your friends about **BBR**, go into Forbidden Planet or your local specialist shop and get them to order **BBR** through Titan, and get your friends to do the same. With your support, the magazine will grow bigger and better still, and we'll both be the winners. ❑

And now the bad news ...

We are sorry to have to announce that with issue #15 of **BBR**, the price of the magazine will be increased to £1:75/$5 per copy, with a four issue subscription now costing £6:30/$18. This is the first time that the price of **BBR** has had to be raised for more than a year, during which time the magazine has grown from 40 to 64 pages. This price rise has been caused by the according increase in our postage and production costs. ❑

NEWS IN BRIEF

❑ Issue #13 of **BBR** was reviewed on Ukrainian National Radio on 29 August 1989, by our good friend **Masha Kopylenko**, who lives in Kiev. The feature lasted five minutes, and reached an audience of 50 million people.

❑ **Lyle Hopwood** is one of the contributors to a new Austrian anthology of SF by women writers from Europe and the USA. Her story "Milk" appears in *Der Riss Im Himmel*, edited by Karin Ivancsics of the Weiner Frauenverlag collective, which also includes stories by Kathy Acker, Misha, Rachel Pollack and Joanna Russ among others. *Der Riss Im Himmel*, ISBN 3-900399-33-6, DM 34 from Weiner Frauenverlag, A-1080 Wien, Lange Gasse 51 10, Austria.

❑ Illustrator **Martin Chatfield**, a former animator with Hanna Barbara, has been busy doing the animation and video production on the "Jive Bunny" videos, and is now starting work on three feature films for Walt Disney in London.

❑ **Steve Sneyd's** collection of mini-sagas, *Fifty-Fifty Infinity*, has just been published in a US edition by Starsong in South Carolina, whilst his shared book of poems with Bruce Boston – illustrated by **t. Winter-Damon** – is due soon from Ocean View Press.

❑ The latest issue of the horror magazine *Dagon* is a **D.F. Lewis** special edition, featuring nine new stories as well as a comprehensive bibliography, and articles about Des from close friends Mark Samuels and Peter Jeffery. *Dagon* #26: £1:40 from Carl Ford, 11 Warwick Road, Twickenham, Middlesex TW2 6SW.

SEQUEL

Allen Ashley

The film was called *The Terror From Out There*. It was one of those old black and white Hollywood "B" movies where some implausible alien threatens the Earth – or mid-west America, anyway – and the hero, after suffering only a few cuts and bruises, finds a devastatingly simple solution to the problem, defeats the invader, and wins the girl.

"X-rays," said Joe. "They're our only hope. That must be why when one of them blundered into the hospital they didn't kill you but had to retreat."

"But darling," said Marilyn, "how are you going to expose them to x-rays?"

"That's what I'm working on," Joe answered. "I just hope I'm not too late."

"What about the radiation in the Van Allen belts?" I whispered to my companion. "Surely that would have affected them adversely?"

She didn't hear me, however. She'd stayed awake for the 3D spectacular at the top of the bill, but now her red and green glasses had slipped down her nose and she snored ever so softly.

Turfed out of the pub at eleven with nowhere else to go, the late night crowd in my local fleapit entered into the spirit of things, feigning horror at the dreaded beings and cheering the clean-cut, cool hero's every step as the film moved to its climax.

Marilyn's father, editor of the local newspaper, was swallowing a bucketful of pride. "I have to admit, young feller," he was saying, "that I thought you were kinda crazy at first and I didn't much like you hanging round with my daughter. But I seen some things these last few days that no man oughta see and ... well, I just gotta say, I'm with you all the way."

"Atta boy, Pop," Joe replied. "Now if you and Bill Nolan can just see about fixing up that generator, we're gonna make these aliens feel hotter than a month of clambakes."

I turned my attention a little way from the screen, looking at the dust motes in the projection beam. The characters on the screen were made of light. They were not flesh and blood, and even the 3D film was but an optical illusion. I fell asleep momentarily and experienced a vivid burst of dream in which I envisaged an attempted conquest of the Earth through the medium of light, an army of invading photons ...

I jerked awake, concentrated on the final reel, echoed the ironic cheers as Joe and Marilyn linked arms, extraterrestrial corpses all about their feet. They faded, the plush curtain swept across the screen, but an after-image lingered in my mind's eye.

I tried to wake my girlfriend but she did not stir. We were in the middle of the row and people were pushing to get past. I rose to my feet and somehow felt myself swept along towards the exit by a suddenly purposeful crowd, as if the building was on fire.

I expected the eternal neon lights of noctur-

nal London – the off licences, the oriental supermarkets, the all-night sex shops. Instead everywhere seems monochrome, wooden, pastoral. The last picture show has just turned out and people are casually straggling back to their white painted, wooden frame buildings. There is only one bar in this town and the elderly proprietor is already lowering the shutters for the night. My legs are tired. I need sleep more than I need a drink.

Eventually I find a barn where the varnished door opens easily to my touch. The building feels warms and smells of the country, with just enough of cow dung aroma to make it homely but not so much as to be unpalatable. I settle down in the straw.

I wake to a washed out grey sky underpopulated by scarce white clouds. The sun blazes down on the dry, dusty soil. The light is exceptionally bright here. I sit for a long time watching the rays penetrate the slats, hoping they might burst into bold prismatic rainbows but being disappointed.

At last I can ignore the void in my stomach no longer and decide to go out and buy – or more accurately, *earn* – my breakfast. I remember the way to Marilyn's father's house. It is built on stilts and he is sitting on the porch squinting at an array of black and white photographs.

"I want a job, sir," I announce without further ado.

"Do you now, young feller? Can you type?"

I can operate keyboards for Apple, Wang, Sinclair, NEC, and a dozen others. I don't tell him this.

"Yes, sir, I can type, sir."

"You had breakfast?"

"No, sir."

"Well, it's eggs, toast, coffee. Nothing fancy. Man's food, that's all."

"Perfectly wonderful," I assure him.

"You English?"

"Yes, sir."

He fetches a second plate. It is chipped slightly.

"And what do you expect to do on my paper, boy? Hmm?" he asks me through a mouthful of food.

"I hadn't really thought too much about it. Maybe film and book reviews."

"Yeah, well you'll have to do a lot more than that to earn your crust. Picture house don't change the film no more'n once a month now."

I ponder this awhile. "Well, er, weddings, grain harvests, ball games, whatever you want."

"We'll see, son, we'll see."

So I begin working on the *Crooked Gulch and Newson County Weekly Herald*, but in truth there is not enough work to justify two pairs of hands. No matter. I get paid by the word and the rest of the time I fill in with odd jobs tinkering with cars at the gas station or mending roofs.

I soon get to know the newly-weds who'd saved the earth from certain invasion. Marilyn is a trainee radiologist. As well as holding down a job and keeping house for her husband, she also regularly brings an evening meal or a special treat over to her father. On Friday night Joe accompanies her.

We men drink whisky that's pale in the glass and volcanic in the throat. My employer, Nathaniel by christening but Nat by populism, sets up a card table. I'm becoming accustomed to this world where a green baize looks medium grey. I rub the soft surface to reassure myself of its reality.

I am lucky tonight, winning cents and dimes by the dozen. Nat scowls. On the far side of the room Marilyn is reading *Gone With The Wind*. How light her hair seems.

I lose a couple of hands.

"What are you dreaming about?" Joe asks.

"I was just thinking of my girlfriend," I reply.

"Oh yeah. And where is she, then?"

"Last time I saw her she was asleep in a cinema in North London."

Joe and Nat laugh. Joe says: "One real English gentleman this guy, eh, Pop?"

Nat nods thoughtfully. Joe continues: "That's some strange story there, bud."

"Not as strange as yours," I answer.

Joe purses his lips. Nat has an ace of spades ready to play; it drops to the deck. Even Marilyn looks up.

Joe says: "You know, huh?"

"I suppose that's why I'm here. But I'd like to hear it in your own words, Joe, some time."

"You and Pop gonna put it in the paper?"

"That's up to Nat."

Nat scratches the stubble on his chin, says: "Well, I've been meaning to ask you about it before, Joe. If you've no objections."

Joe tells his story. It is essentially similar, though more detailed, to the one I already know. Marilyn timidly interrupts twice to correct him on minor chronological errors.

When he's finished, Joe says: "There's folks round *here* don't even believe me so I don' see why a stranger should."

I smile. "You have my word ... as an Englishman, that I believe you, Joe. I shall write it up and let que sera sera."

They exchange puzzled looks. Nat says: "It's gonna be more in'eresting than Hymie Blofelt's prize bullock."

Everything is so bright here. Trees and fences cast monolithic shadows. The buildings glow with an aura of saintliness. The people are made of light.

I have become a lodger, observer, and chronicler in Joe and Marilyn's life. Joe is a fascinating man. Educated only to high school level he possesses a natural aptitude for all electronic gadgetry. He dreams alternately of running his own serendipitous workshop or of being a senior researcher for one of the high-tech multinationals.

"It'll never come true, though," he grumbles, "neither of them. I ain't got no college qualifications and I ain't got no cash to set up on my own."

"Joe," Marilyn admonishes. "You saved the world, remember? Surely that's enough for one lifetime."

"It don't pay the rent, baby," is his reply.

And she, too, seems weighed down by the burdens of the mundane world. She takes precious little pleasure in her work as a trainee radiologist. She sulks over breakfast; she curses floridly on her return from the hospital in the evening.

Yet there burns a small ray of hope in her life.

"We're having a car boot sale for the children's ward," she announces, or, "I'm sponsoring Nancy on that walk for the orphans," or, "Did you know Mary Lou's expecting twins?"

Children, all the time – children. As if her brief flurry of independence is abruptly over and, like an insect, she now exists only to give birth to the next generation.

Then everything changes. Nat, my part-time employer, has rustled up enough cowhands and two-bit farmers to testify, at least in newsprint, to the veracity of Joe's story. A big city contacts me about my report. Media hounds sniff the scent of either a hugely enjoyable hoax or the human interest story of the century.

"This is it, babe," Joe says to Marilyn, clutching a telegram from one of the TV networks. "This is the big time," he adds, unnecessarily.

I am sitting in a genuine wooden rocking chair under the shade of the awning thinking I could really get into this agrarian lifestyle, but I know the moment won't last.

"Do we have to sell up and go, honey?" Marilyn protests. "I never really wanted to leave Crooked Gulch."

"You've gotta – aw, what's the saying? – yeah, you've gotta strike while the iron's hot, sweetheart. This place is finished. Failing crops, scrawny cattle, it's damn near a dust bowl already. In six months you'll be looking down on New York or LA from a penthouse flat wondering why things didn't pan out so good even earlier."

KLOSTERMANN

And Joe is right in a way. Day after day the sun beats down on to soil that is ever whiter and even more arid. The sky is permanently pale grey with never a hint of rain. The nights are cold and the firmament is a coal-black garment beautified by brilliant diamonds sewn in irrational patterns.

Joe stakes his whole future on the one prospect. He has gambled his all before – against the irascibly evil Alpha Centaurans – and won. This time his enemies are merely humans and their wasp society. Maybe his luck will hold.

By default, I become Joe's agent and manager. In a patriarchal state, Marilyn's role has been largely degraded or neglected. No one seems keen to pick up on a "Husband And Wife Wallop Aliens" angle.

This all suits Marilyn. She is nervous enough simply sitting in the audience during the mid-morning recording of a TV chat show. I squeeze her hand. She is gritting her teeth. I return backstage to look after my charge.

The assistant producer is saying: "These are the questions Johnny will ask you, Joe. Just answer them simply and honestly. If the audience responds – you know, laughing or clapping or so forth – try just to concentrate on what you're saying. Okay?"

I glance through the cue sheet. It all seems straightforward enough. I give Joe a slap on the back and return to my seat in the second row. Marilyn, resplendent in a white Southern belle outfit, radiates scent like a trapped animal.

Joe is confident; to him it's a breeze but I remain uneasy. *Johnny*, his interrogator, is one big smarm bag, and a snide into the bargain. His tone, his facial expression and his body language undercut every word of God's own truth which honest Joe utters.

After the show Joe and Marilyn celebrate in style, but I elect to stay at home with my dark misgivings.

Their real honeymoon begins as I haggle on the phone to organize more media coverage and interviews. Joe is flavour of the month and lapping it up. Marilyn wraps her adoration and devotion around him like a spider's web. Lesser men would suffocate.

We do spots with Walter, Freddie and Ed; we give interviews to Posts, Chronicles, and Observers. Some are kinder than others but even the most benevolent has his tongue firmly glued to the inside of his cheek. The more malignant are serpents cloaked in tweed jackets.

Joe counts his new-found fortune with a farmboy's sense of wonder.

I advise him: "You ought to cash in on your fame now. This won't last. Look to the future and see about getting yourself that research job."

He is sitting in a grey foam-filled armchair in our hotel suite, holding a champagne glass in his left hand. The fizzy wine has just the slightest tinge of yellow-gold and I take this as a sign of approaching redemption. Marilyn is at Joe's feet, gazing up at him like you gaze up at the Statue of Liberty.

Joe says: "You take care of it, huh? You're a good man, Jack, a dependable Englishman."

So I spend a few weeks busy as a clerk in a benefit office, typing out multiple copies for Joe's employment applications, and attempting to transcribe his innate knowledge into technical jargon and blueprints to accompany his enquiries.

The television interviews dry up but the two bright young things remain optimistic, dismissing my caution as typical British pessimism.

"I'll have my pick of the jobs soon," he boasts. "Hey, Marilyn, who do you want your husband working for – ITT, Hoover, General Electric, or Eastman Kodak? How about the State Department?"

But the bubbly goes flat. The rejections start coming in. "Too young", "too inexperienced", "not cognizant with our special field". Their excuses are all very reasonable, but superficial too.

Joe begs me to uncover the truth. I indulge in a little subterfuge. I hone my natural accent to a clipped crispness, introduce myself as a caller from the London *Times* or the Manchester *Guardian*.

"We've been following Joe Molina's career

very closely over here in Blighty," I intone. "He seems to have a certain public standing and an undoubted expertise in the electronics field."

"Yes, I agree, Mr ... er mister?"

"Windsor."

"I agree, Mr Windsor."

"Then why is he not on your payroll?"

"Waal, ah ..."

Then, swayed by my very persuasive mock-aristocratic tones, one lackey admits to me: "Well, the thing is, Mr Windsor, it was felt rather dangerous from a sales and prestige point of view for this company to associate with a – uh – a UFO nut."

It's like reaching square 99 on the board and then being sent sliding down a huge snake back to square one. Even though I've been expecting it, I feel almost as devastated as Joe and Marilyn.

Their marriage, built on love and courage that has seen them through high school, hardship, and goddam green bastards from Alpha Centauri, now begins to falter, flicker, fade. They become shadows of their former selves, gutted candles.

Joe takes the last of the money and disappears for a few days – I can only presume, to the bars and brothels of the red light district. Marilyn sits and stares at the wall. She has already packed her bags ready to go back to her father's place. Maybe she will try and recommence her interrupted studies.

Shy and almost virginal by nature, she nevertheless attempts one ill-judged pass at me. She is like a ghost and I take little pleasure in the experience. We part almost as greater strangers than before.

I wave at her departing greyhound bus and make my way back to the hotel, planning to check out the next morning.

Joe is sitting in the main room with the light extinguished.

"Hi there, Jack," he whispers. I strain to hear him. He continues: "I've been telling a few people down on Seventy Seventh about what I done. You know, to some I'm a hero but I look around at my life and I think about the future and it all seems so squalid. I saved the world but I can't save myself."

I nod, but he can't see me in the gloom. I can smell his *Jack Daniels* breath, though. I reply: "All heroes suffer self-doubt, Joe, and sometimes the weight of the world gets too much for them. Look at George Best."

"Who?"

"Oh, you wouldn't have heard of him. I'm just saying that heroes have suffered before and that perhaps you should go home and be a farmer or run the general stores."

"Maybe you're right, Jack, and maybe I will. And let's have some light in this room – we're talking like two blind men."

He's unshaven and scruffy as I'd expected. There's a knife scar down one side of his boyish face. I blink, see red oozing through into this monochrome world. I help dress the wound and make ready to leave. I find I am unencumbered by any important possessions.

In the downtown streets the taxicabs are beginning to look yellow again. I can hear an odd birdlike sound in my left ear, a little akin to a light snore. I'm not sure where I'm going until I find an all-night cinema running a horror and science fiction bill. I put down a ten cents deposit on some 3D glasses. The filters are red and green.

The place is crowded and the only space is in the middle of a row. I sit down next to a familiarly pretty young woman and I say to her: "Wake up, darling, or you'll miss the part where they zap the aliens." ❑

Allen Ashley's biggest claim to fame after a rather chequered career is a story entitled "Dead to the World" in the anthology *The Best Horror from Fantasy Tales*. He has appeared twice on stage in London with Hawkwind, and had an article in *Interzone* many moons ago. He has work due soon in *Fantasy Tales*.

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SYNOPSIS OF A LOOKING-GLASS REBELLION

Michael Cobley

OMINOUS TERRAIN

A pure pearl of a moon in the clear night sky. Splintered reflections, like flotsam silver, rode wavelets up the beach to tremble and dissolve among the pebbles. John Stafford gazed down at the polished stones, the strands of kelp, the empty shells, and with a booted toe pushed the gleaming shingle into a bulwark ready for the sea's next assault on the island.

"I could be dead," he said, "and that tyrant MacNee would really be in trouble." He glanced at his jailer. "Your masters in Edinburgh plan to keep me in good health, no doubt."

The security captain was silent for a moment, pale eyes fixed on a dark formation of storm clouds slowly whirling in from the south. Then he smiled a terrible smile.

"We plan for every eventuality, Mr Stafford."

TYRANNY AND MUTATION

Order papers were waved and the Grand Chamber reverberated with jubilant shouts of approval from the government benches. Having dismissed the Opposition's argument with his customary vigour and resolve, Throne Minister Kenneth MacNee resumed his seat. The Crown Moderator raised the ceremonial stave against the commotion.

"Order! Order! ... We see the speaker for West Sussex."

Shapes moved behind the gallery windows, remote-controlled cameras that turned, angled and zoomed on Leo Fairfax as he stood to an expectant hush.

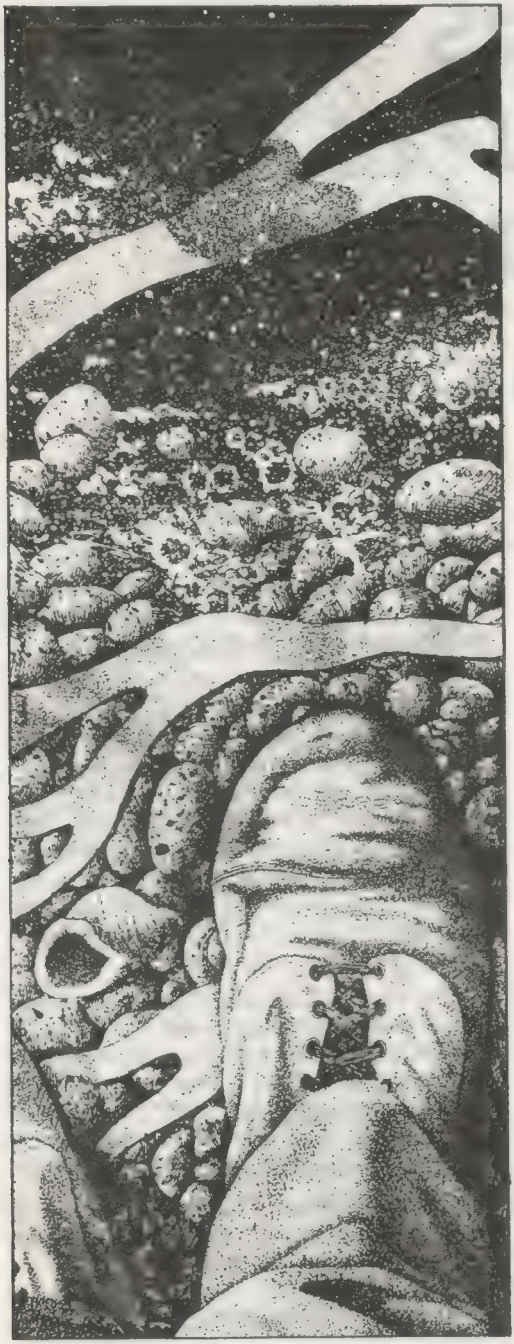
"My Lord Moderator," he began. "In centuries to come, when historians look back at this moment and this oppressive piece of legislation, they will draw a line and say 'Here marks the end of Brittanic democracy'. And whenever they mention the name of Kenneth MacNee, it will only be to demonstrate, my Lord, how one man can hijack a political party, then a nation, and through his single-minded arrogance tear that nation apart.

"On his shoulders alone the responsibility lies. Because this disgraceful Act in truth releases the English people from any obligation to the Accord of 1476." Near him, speakers were calmly rising to their feet. "Thus there is no longer any need for the Albion Party to participate further in this *Scottish* Parliament!"

There was uproar. Cries of "Traitor!" and "Coward!" harried the ninety-one speakers as they filed from the Chamber.

MIDNIGHT IN THE ZODIAC DESERT

We scaled the wall of the castle by night, a cliff of stone gleaming with frost. We knew that



at that very moment in London, our valiant comrades were emerging from Battlefield Forest, skirting the still water mirror of the Serpentine, and making ready to storm the Crown Halls on Treaty Hill.

I felt keyed up, drawn taut with excitement and fear. Hand over hand, with the compact winch humming at my waist, I followed the Sergeant up the icy face. Swiftly over the battlements and on to the parapet. We crouched in shadows there, sixteen of us in eight pairs spaced along the rampart. The Sergeant paused to study his knapsack deep-scanner; its tiny screen cast electric-green highlights across his features.

In the cold I remembered our endless training, and imagined holding the weight of the Orb or the Sceptre in my hands. I remembered my father, my mother, their smallholding deep in the Bedford farmlands. I remembered parties at Christmas, songs at harvest, gatherings at market. I remembered Rosemary and seemed to recall love and regret ...

The Sergeant suddenly looked up, something unreadable in his face. Then he turned and grinned.

"Stick by me, sunshine, and you won't go far wrong!"

HAMMER OF THE LENS

VIDEO: LONG SHOT, an armoured car, overturned and burning on a snowbound country road. The heat has melted snow and ice from adjacent trees, and vapour wisps from overhanging branches. A soldier in cold-weather gear, and wearing a weaponry auto-harness, cautiously approaches the wrecked vehicle while speaking into a hand-held communication device. CUT to

CLOSE-UP of a uniformed body sprawled halfway out of the driver's hatch. An outflung hand lies partly buried in a muddy mass of slush. DISSOLVE to

Flames. Greasy black smoke. DISSOLVE to

Snow. FADE OUT.

GEOMETRIES OF LOYALTY

We emerged from the forest under a moonlit night, converging in twos and threes on the camouflaged arms cache. We all knew at that moment in Edinburgh, our comrades, our friends, were climbing the walls of the Great Castle. As I stood there, distributing our precious arsenal, my heart went out to them, poor bloody fools sent on a fool's mission. With covert stealth they'd be treading stairways and corridors I knew so well, blind to the accumulated glories of five centuries of Brittanic Imperium.

But they wouldn't encounter security guards like those awaiting us in the Crown Halls; it would be the Hammermen, the military élite of the Clan-Regiment of the Imperial Standard. Once, *they* were all the friends I had, all the life I knew. Once, I too wore that sash with the insignia clasp at my shoulder, and breathed loyalty and pride. Was it only six months since false charges led to my dishonourable discharge and set me on this route of betrayal?

A tinny voice came over on my headset, an advance scout relaying the unexpected arrival of a motorised militia company. Nearby, a gangling youth held his autorifle in a white-knuckle grip and gave me an enquiring look. I thought of the guard posts we'd have to win past to reach that office, that safe, that information.

"Well now, laddie –" I forced a grin, "– stay by me and you'll no' go far wrong!"

THE INTERLOCKING LANDSCAPE ZONE

(Excerpt from the memoirs of High Earl Muir of Kintail)

In retrospect, the English Uprising was the first genuine crisis faced by the Brittanic peoples since the Secession of the Americas in 1937. The Albion Party staged its walkout and citizens awoke on the morning of that first day of 1997 to find that their lives had been irrevocably changed. And the tragic evidence was *there*, starkly real on the screens of their televisions.

The harrowing raid on the Great Castle, the barricaded towns and villages, the burning of Oxford, the gangs of looters roaming the countryside, the pointless deaths of English youth. It was a protracted agony that, paradoxically, strengthened the position of the Throne Minister and his 'supervisory' cabinet against the already severely weakened opposition parties. Thus, the draconian laws concocted in the wake of the crisis have yet further clothed our once-proud democracy in the garb of despotism.

As I have already stated, I feel that I must bear a considerable measure of culpability, for in the years before Kenneth MacNee took office only I was in a position to do him political harm. Close friends argue otherwise, putting blame on the Holy Northern Church or fixing upon section ministers who supported him unquestioningly. In reply I need only point out that MacNee remained such a strong Throne Minister because he surrounded himself with weak subordinates.

But regardless of the apportioning of blame, there is little doubt that the misgovernment which fuelled the Uprising of '97 was the utter ruin of *two* great nations, not one.

WHEELS OF CONFUSION

How scared was I? Well, 's difficult to remember sometimes. It's like the whole thing happened to somebody else, just running and running, firing through glass windows at empty offices, kicking doors in. There was gunfire behind us, and screaming and shouting, and a thump when someone let off a grenade. And all the time this ... *panic* like a rat or a snake was sitting in your chest with a grip on your throat.

I remember the Hammerman, though, clear as day. He led us upstairs to some big shot's office, blew open this big safe and grabbed some papers. Then he got us downstairs and out a back way, while he read something off those papers to someone on the other end of his radio link, something about an island. And all the time his leg was bloody and shot up. I remember him, all right, remember being *scared* of him, too ...

We got separated after that and most of us got caught. They say Stafford escaped during the '97 and went to the Americas. Hope so. But I never saw the Hammerman again. Never heard a thing about him, either.

COMMUNICATION JIGSAW

VIDEO: EXTERIOR MEDIUM SHOT across a snow-covered carpark to the main building of a large rambling hospital. Men and women run past, clutching rifles or children or both. PAN RIGHT to

MEDIUM SHOT of two tanks moving up from an adjacent motorway feeder lane. Both are sleek with swept curves – they look as if they were designed in a wind tunnel. The aerodynamic turrets turn, barrels angling to bear and then fire. SMASH-CUT to

MEDIUM SHOT of an explosion mid-way up the hospital wall. Shards of masonry fly. INTERCUT with EXTREME CLOSE-UP of the fire-flash from a tank barrel. SHARP CUT to

SIDE SHOT of the hospital frontage as a shell explodes inside the building. Windows burst outwards, curtains and venetian blinds flutter in the blast. Glass slivers whirl and rain on the people fleeing below. ANGLE WIDENS to take in the carpark where bodies lie in the snow. A soldier in fur-trimmed camouflage combats enters the FRAME and approaches the camera, hand raised to the lens. FREEZE-FRAME and FADE OUT.

A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE

The gunfire ceased and suddenly there was silence on the stairwell. I swallowed against dread and glanced at the youth dying over in the corner. He lay quietly, dull eyes closing in pain whenever he coughed. He seemed glazed with death, clasping the Orb to his ruined chest with his last remaining strength. Its golden surface was smeared with his blood and in that moment I loathed it, a king's bauble, an empty

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symbol. I want to pull it from his grasp and hurl it down at those dispassionate killers.

Instead I crouched by him as the medic used the last of the pindisk painkillers, thumbing them to the boy's neck.

"Has he said anything?"

The medic shook his head. "His lips move, sometimes. See? But there's nothing to hear. He doesn't even whisper."

Without knowing why, I bent close to listen. But there was only his slowly fading breath, no murmur, no words, no absolution. I straightened just as a small black object flew up from below and arced towards the edge of the landing. I shouted at the sniper I'd posted there but he vanished in the flash and slam of the explosion. Then the roar of gunfire began and this time never ended.

DOGFIGHTS IN THE DEEP

Once the bodies of the security guards were airlifted back to the mainland, teams of specialists arrived to examine the incident site. But it was a perfunctory scrutiny, less than six hours spent searching the beach where the raiders came ashore, and scratching about in the firebombed bungalow that had been Stafford's prison.

Before they left, the two burned-out cars in the drive were pushed off a nearby cliff and into the sea. After the specialists departed, debris from the submerged cars began floating to the surface. Ash, chips and fragments of charred wood, sections of plastic dashboard buckled by heat, torn and scorched scraps of a map of Scotland. A sad detritus that washed up along the shore, creating in tide pools tiny exhibitions of destruction, overlaying pebbles and sand with an ominous new terrain. ❑

Mike Cobley is 30 and lives in Glasgow. Editor of the critical broadsheet *Shark Tactics*, he has had a number of stories in the UK small press, as well as in the Canadian magazine *Edge Detector*. Mike's first professional appearance was in *Other Edens II* in 1988, and he has just finished his first novel, *Catacombs*.

BOYS

D.F. LEWIS

i. Unidentifying Flying Objects

Boys were insects. Or so it seemed to Major as he weaved his way among them to put a stop to a scrap between two of them at a thinly frequented part of the schoolyard. This was his fifth tour of playtime duty in a week and he wondered why teaching had to be *his* vocation: nobody had made him do it, in fact many of his college contemporaries had ribbed him and, if he'd been of a weaker mind, he would no doubt have ended up like his friends in stockbroker's offices, earning money left right and centre. Still, it was a nice day today, good to be outside under a clear blue sky.

"White!" he shouted as he caught one of the culprits by the earlobe. He could not help thinking that in the old days street urchins like these were actively encouraged in the arts of pugilism.

"Yes, sir?" said a thin boy with thick grey trousers down to his shinbones.

The other boy had scuttled off before he could be recognised, but Major had a suspicion ...

His ruminations were interrupted by the outlandish sound of a mechanical roaring from above. All those boys not caught up in the periphery of the fight's repercussions had their faces already level with the cloudless sky, volcano-cone noses pointing upwards.

Idle White took the opportunity to wriggle free from Major's pincer fingers and legged it across the playground, seeking out the boy, who'd just been his companion in fisticuffs, within the heady confines of the Boys'. They'd both probably decided that it was in their interests not to pay too much heed to the mysterious roaring from above: they could not afford to be left out in the open, with Major on the warpath. So, eventually, inside the dank, seeping darkness, Idle White felt his way to the nearest cubicle door and rattled the latch as he called: "Treff, Treff, are you in there?"

He could still hear the noise, but now it was muffled, more lugubrious with its continuous under-rumbling.

There was no answer.

Idle White was nonplussed. The motions of his mind were far too slow to support finer feelings. Sometimes, he even wondered whether he was who he thought he was. His whole life had been playing arse-up to his

father's belt, dangling his baby sister above the water butt in the garden and drawing intricate grids across the pages of his schoolbooks rather than read them meaningless words.

If Treff was not there, where was he? He did not exactly want to hurt him again. One fight's enough between friends ... for a while anyway. White must have been thinking hard for time passed without properly realizing it. Treff must have been outside all the time, risking punishment from Major, maybe believing that he had not been identified.

Major did not scare White. Why then this skulking inside the Boys'? Surely not to avoid the likes of a teacher. He lifted himself from his haunches, rubbing at the damp patches on his trousers. There was silence beyond the door.

Unaccountably, he thought of the family back home. His mother ... but she'd died years ago and he could not recall hide nor hair of her. His father, the despot who tried to keep the rest of them from existing. His sister. His half sister. His third brother. His second cousin. Idle White, himself. And ...

The schoolyard was deserted. The whole sky was of metal grey. It was easy being a teacher when all the boys had gone. Major ambled towards the staff room, buttoning up his flies.

ii. Boys Will Be Boys

Boys will be boys. Or that's what my mother used to say, when I'd got up to some mischief or other.

I had a particular friend. You know the sort, one you remember for the rest of your life, even though you never see him again from, say, the age of seven. Most faces are non-stick, easily passing through the memory ... and out again. But Jules was different.

One of the games we used to play in the school playground was called "Girls". I can't recall much about it now, since the mental fuse-wire of the experience blew some time ago.

It's strange, I can still see faces out of the corner of the eye of my mind hustling in from all quarters of the playground, watching Jules and I at our games. I recognise none of their ill-defined features nor pick out actual words from their hubbub.

But, one stark staring day, the call of "Fight Fight Fight Fight" bounced off the ancient school walls like the ghost of a future football crowd (for in those far-off days, fans did not chant mindlessly but waved scarves and twirled rattles) ... and the memory is even clearer to me now than the present.

Jules and I were playing the "Eyeball" game, where opponents would crouch knee to knee, face peering intently into face: the first to blink would be the loser.

We must have stared at each other for the good part of dinner break. An irresistible force meeting an immovable object ...

Time was frozen then. I can jump back into that moment whenever I like and I sometimes do so when modern existence wears me thin. As I re-enter my own body as a boy, it's like easing into the comfortable clothes of the past. All is silent. Desperately silent. The wire of memory as taut as a piano's. Incredibly, his two separate eyeballs are of different colours, one glinting like a ruby, the other like an emerald. Then, Jules' head audibly shatters, scattering splinters of bony blood and curds of brain to every corner of the playground.

I had won. And the cheers erupted round me.

I'll ever see Jules' face staring back at me, a suspicion of growing sadness in his eyes. I recall it clearly, for how I had studied it in obsessive detail for that frozen unblinking moment of childhood.

Boys will be boys and never will be men.

iii. Down From The Roots

The boy removed from his pocket what resembled a squat, round pillbox. He was sitting in the fork of a tree, looking down upon his home town, distantly laid out in the valley like the models on the carpet of his bedroom in one of those very houses below him.

The tall factory chimneys did not belch smoke, for it was Sunday. He wondered why the Old Fathers had decided to build them right

at the centre of the town, where the terraced grids were at their thickest. Perhaps, to ease the journey for those who worked there ... which used to be 98.6% of the inhabitants, but now with unemployment spreading like a cancer even through the most industrious streets, the proportion was sliding down the temperature gauge towards a new ice age.

The boy was old for his age. He was the kid philosopher of his times. He knew more about life than most ... he seemed to soak in the mental energy emanating from the town roofs, *willing* it not to wane. He saw himself as a deity. The other boys spurned him, because they did not like the way he looked at them. Not unfriendly, but all-knowing. Almost pitiful of what he saw in their eventual fate.

He opened the pillbox and took out a roll of narrow paper tape which seemed to have raised circular blemishes spaced equally along its length. He put it to his nose, but the smell was not significant ... though an underlay of its potential ...

He was interrupted by a flash of sun on one of the windows below. Someone had evidently spotted him, examining his insect speck in the only tree that had survived the recent wind storm, its branch-holds slipping on the frictionless summer sky, standing like a skeleton of an alien monster upon the hill ridge.

Let them look. He could outlook them any day. He had nothing to hide.

Inserting the roll into his silver cap gun, he artfully wove the strip between the spindles, letting just a short tab protrude under the hammer. Satisfied with what he had accomplished, he caressed the trigger with his index-finger, testing purchase upon it. But, for some reason, he could not yet find impetus to pull it.

Now, an old man, he yearned for one more sniff of that redolence blossoming from a burst caphead. That would retrieve his lost youth, recollections of times unhindered by modernity and of thoughts even too shameful to remember. Through the open window, the old man looked and looked and looked ... he saw the old tree still there; it had only moved to the side a few yards in the intervening years; the ridge itself had only been slightly weathered into different contours.

The insect was incredibly still there in the fork of its branches, waving its hair-trigger feelers. The old man flinched as he heard the tall factory chimney crashing to the ground ... another echo from a past age. He put on his old Davy Crockett hat, and slept.

iv. Movement's End

Treff and Idle White peered from their eyes and saw stars sparkling like scattered jewels. It was as if a careless, or self-disgusted, thief had left them in his wake.

Then, the two boys wondered if they were not really looking down upon a town, where night had failed to dowse the lighted windows of their erstwhile neighbours. The actual words in their minds were nothing like those that were written, but words themselves often have mismeaning to freight them, for the sense of the word is in the way it's used or the way it's not. If I said the boys were in a spaceship, the whole thrust of my story would misfire and stall.

But that's where they were: a roaring, sometimes stuttering, star-hopper, built by ambitious inhabitants of a world similar to ours, except they had the gumption to exceed their own abilities ... unlike the men and women we all know so well who squat within their own skulls, dreaming that they might hatch one day into full-blossomed butterflies with wings wide and strong enough to reach the strange, beautiful fulfilments at the shimmering heartlands of the universe, but ever retreating into the petty incestuous reality that money and earthbound love engenders.

The spaceship hovered seemingly for an eternity of misbegotten entropies, its engines now humming silently on underdrive, evidently reluctant to leave the slight ghost of an attraction from the planet below. The night had by now slipped round the corners of the world, sliding like opaque slime. The town that had once been the stars to those on board was creeping with incipient insect life; the various self-contained beings wove intricately curved grids that were clear to the observers in the sky but entirely unknown to those who actually

constituted them.

Idle White nudged Treff and pointed to the schoolyard where they had once flicked cigarette cards. Boys scattered across its concrete surface, whereon white lines had been painted to cater for the demarcations of various ball games, but those games that the boys played on their own seemed underpinned by nothing but bright illogic and fresh disorder. But these were different boys than had played here only the day before. Or they were ghosts of those who'd once played here. Only the sole teacher on playtime duty tried to reimpose the patterns ...

Treff's turn to nudge Idle White: there was a boy evidently playing truant, crouching in a tree at the rising edge of the town, like a spider roosting in the web of its winter branches. Even at this range, they saw this was Idle White himself ... and they wept bitterly as they unaccountably realised that *they* were the ghosts, and the real boys were in the schoolyard.

The spaceship shuddered as the unseen pilot placed a huge humped cap into the triggerhold of its gun turret ... which in turn swivelled the barrel on its grinding plinth, targeted it upon the tiny skull of a boy haunched up in the schoolyard opposite his friend similarly contorted ... and fired pointblank. The flash was blinding ... and a tall factory chimney in the industrial part of the town crumbled to the ground in apparent sympathy or symphony (or ricochet), thus concealing the abrupt sound of the spaceship's roaring off into those parts of the universe where there was no light to go faster than ...

Pity the words meant nothing.

Despite this, the butterfly followed on. ❑

There must by now be very few British small press magazines in which Des Lewis has not yet appeared. A writer of prolific output, he works for an insurance company by day. This is his third story for *BBR*, having last appeared in issue #12 with "Em".

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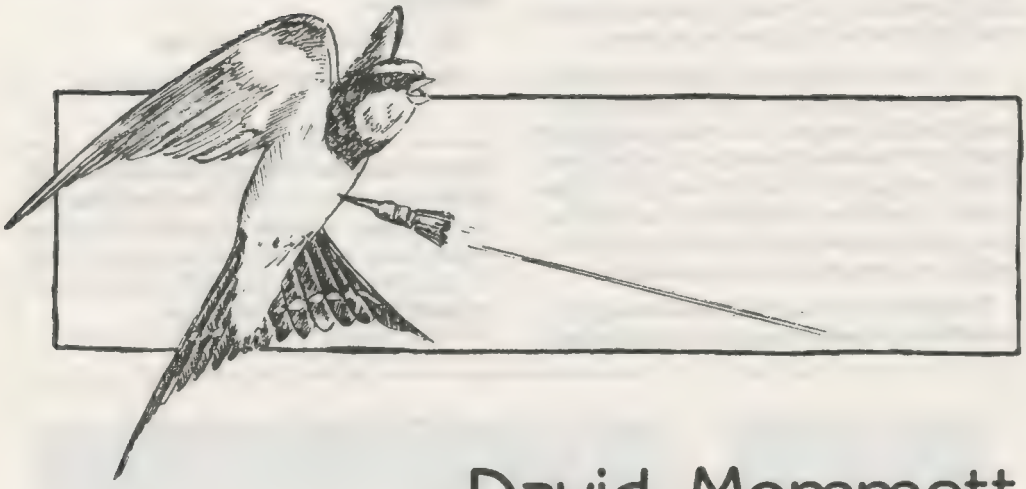
INSTRUMENT OF THE DOMINANT GENE



David Memmott

Herald," she froze in front of their upstairs bedroom window, "there's someone in our tree." The muscles of her jaw flexed spasmodically and her predator eyes narrowed like a mongoose eyeing a snake in the grass. Herald backed up slowly, blocking her view, the morning sun at his back. She craned her neck to peek around him, but he mirrored her every move, thus spoiling her vantage, obscuring her vision with his head and shoulders as if protecting some vulnerable bunny from her red-painted nails, gleaming like finely honed penknives. He grabbed her by the shoulders and quickly turned her around.

"Aww, it's probably Conway's kid, Aaron, retrieving his kite again," he assured her, taking her cold bony hand and leading her away from their second story window. "I'll just go have a word with him."

But she wouldn't budge. She rudely pulled away and started back towards the bedroom window, unconcerned that she was only wearing a black bra and panties. "It most certainly is *not* Aaron fetching a kite," she insisted, pushing past him.

He leaped for the window and pulled the shade. "Please," he said, "let's not expose ourselves to the whole neighborhood."

"Herald Dean Whittier!" She spat his full name. He hated it when she treated him like an adolescent. "What are you trying to hide this

time?" Normally he liked his name. It sounded important, like a judge or a famous author. Only when she said it, the name diminished in significance.

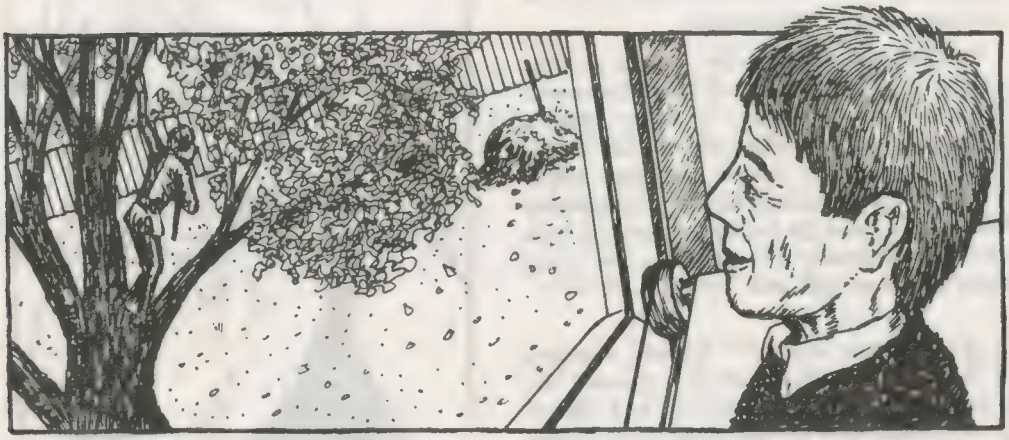
"Nothing," he answered, showing his hands like a magician with nothing up his sleeve. "Really."

His wife would never understand how he looked forward to opening the shade in the morning after she left for work and finding him there, wedged comfortably between branches, devouring a bird or a squirrel with joyful abandon, dropping the bones into a small pile on the ground by the broad trunk of the walnut tree. No, his wife would never understand his feeling of wholeness when their eyes met, never appreciate his feeling of being the overcivilized future fragment facing a primitive, lost self through the window glass. The sight of the Botswana bushman in his simple red loin cloth carrying a goatskin waterbag, shoulder pouch and blowgun on a cord of sinew draped around his neck incited no fear in Herald. If anything, the vision of the bushman calmed his restless spirit.

Nothing short of a miracle kept that woman from seeing the bushman in their English walnut until now, but as chance would have it whenever she happened to glimpse out the upstairs window of their modest two-story house on Belmont, the brown skinned native was hunting or exploring in some other part of the tree above his wife's field of vision, higher up in the spreading canopy or conveniently hidden by the girth of the black trunk.

Herald remembered his childhood invisible friend, Max. He accepted the bushman with the same unquestioning faith and honestly believed the vision was for his eyes only. Vivian's reaction ruled out pure imagination and proved beyond a doubt that his vision was indeed imbued with a degree of materiality, a prospect which both relieved him and made him cautiously nervous on the stranger's behalf. His wife's intolerance of the unknown only embarrassed Herald, something he'd learned to live with, but it could be dangerous to the disoriented dark man who looked like he'd wandered a bit too far off the desert of Botswana.

The bushman resided in their English walnut tree for at least three weeks before Vivian spotted him and, with autumn thinning the leaves, his activities, no matter how discrete, was fated to attract attention sooner



or later.

Three weeks ago this Friday, Herald first spied the tribesman stretched out, napping on one of the lower branches, running in his sleep like a dreaming dog. Over the following weeks, they'd learned to tolerate each other in their own separate worlds. Herald conducted his freelance drafting business in his upstairs studio and the bushman merrily caught robins, flickers, sparrows and squirrels to feed on. They unconsciously rendezvoused back at the bedroom window a couple of times a day. Now and then Herald pulled up a wooden chair and sat quietly observing the bushman with much amusement (as he would a beast in the zoo, expertly ripping open a squirrel, folding back the hide and gnawing voraciously on the gooshy, pink insides). The bushman nodded enthusiastically at Herald with blood smeared on his lips and smiled broadly at the heavens as though giving thanks to the Gods for providing such a horn of plenty. Herald suspected that the bushman watched him with the same interest when he dressed and put on his shoes. The more he thought about it, the more he realized the both of them were imprisoned by conditions forced upon them by circumstances.

The bushman's blowgun fascinated Herald the most. Made of a polished hardwood, crafted with care, an intricate design of religious symbolism carved along its tubular length. The bushman handled the weapon with respect as if it were alive or full of spirits.

Once Herald even dared to slide the window up and try to communicate through the screen, but the smiling Botswana bushman spoke a strange language of clicks and sounds resembling no language Herald had ever heard, except maybe from a dolphin. So he gestured to the bushman and the bushman gestured back until they mutually understood a few crude signs for "greetings" and "nice day, isn't it?"

Herald Dean Whittier!" his wife shouted, "you get out of the way, this minute!" She jerked him back from the window and yanked at the blind. It flew up with a flap and a flutter that made Herald shudder. She suddenly found herself facing the bushman almost nose to nose. His fierce-looking, red painted face buried in the steaming belly of some animal took her quite by surprise. They saw each other simultaneously and both panicked. Vivian screamed so loudly Herald almost disintegrated on the spot like someone standing in the shock wave of a nuclear blast. The bushman scrambled up a branch of the tree so fast he almost fell out, slipping, scraping his leg and catching hold of another branch just in time. Herald felt sympathy for the bushman, meeting his wife that way. Not a desirable introduction at all. He was afraid the bushman might run away, move to another tree in another neighborhood.

Vivian turned, her face drained of color and her hands trembling. What her eyes perceived finally achieved some mental clarity and she knew the animal the bushman had been feeding on was her cat. "My God," she cried, "it was eating Fluffy."

Herald never did like Fluffy. He was a fat

and pampered cat. That damn cat jumped uninvited onto his chest when he was trying to read the Sunday paper, kneaded him with its claws, scratched the expensive furniture even *he* couldn't put his feet on and got away with it, meowed all night at the backdoor keeping him awake and stunk up the backroom with its little box of evil. There was some justice in its ending up easy prey for the Botswana bushman.

Vivian snatched her robe and dashed downstairs in a huff with Herald on her heels. "What are you going to do?" he asked, trying to calm her down. "Don't do anything rash. He's harmless, really."

"Tell that to my poor Fluffy," she moaned, "I'm calling the police, that's what." She picked up the phone and dialed.

"They won't believe you," Herald warned, touching her arm as though apologizing after an argument.

But Vivian wouldn't be placated by his servile demeanor. She didn't tell the police a bushman was terrorizing her in their English walnut. No, she was too smart for that. She told them a punk rocker, probably tripping out on drugs, gutted her cat and was now trying to break in their upstairs window. She blathered so convincingly about how she feared the punk would rape her that Herald thought she deserved an Academy Award for her performance. The police took her seriously though. Within two minutes, two units arrived on the scene with sirens yowling like two tomcats fighting under the porch. The neighbors must think someone's being murdered here, Herald thought. One of the patrolmen, a tall corporal with a confident gait and regulation mustache took control of the situation, got on the bullhorn immediately and ordered the crazy punk down out of the tree.

Suddenly Herald felt dizzy. He shut his eyes, trying to center himself. Instead, he experienced the sensation of seeing firsthand through the eyes of the bushman, feeling what he felt, the same confusion and disorientation.

He didn't understand why the blue people below him were shouting or why he'd attracted so much angry attention. He scrambled higher and higher up the branches of the English walnut, trying to escape the devil voice following him like a curse. He gazed down into the growing crowd of blurred, unfriendly faces and saw himself among them as if he'd somehow astrally projected. He discerned from the anxious expression on his face that he'd better not come down. So he climbed still higher, edging out on a branch until it swayed and bowed under his weight.

Then he was himself again, back in his comfortably broken-in body imploring the patrolman to leave the poor fellow in the tree alone. He followed the officer back to his black and white sedan pleading with him, but the policeman was too absorbed in his duty – calling the fire department.

"That savage ate my Fluffy!" Vivian screamed at the corporal, holding together her robe, her hands quaking with trepidation. The officer handed her a paperbag and instructed her to breathe into it.

"That's right," he said, "deep breaths. You don't want to hyperventilate."

The other patrolman returned with Herald on his heels, still pleading to let the bushman go. "Should I call the ambulance?" he asked the corporal excitedly.

The corporal shook his head, "We don't need any more of a scene." He stroked Vivian's shoulder sympathetically to calm her down. "Take it easy," he said. "We have the situation under control. You're safe now."

"Oh, thank you, officer." She shot Herald her most demeaning, laser glare. "I feel much better knowing you're in charge."

A shining red fire engine screamed down the block with yellow-coated firemen desperately clinging to chrome handles as the engine rounded the corner onto Belmont, screeching to a stop in front of the Whittier home. In a few minutes, two firemen and the corporal with his tranquilizer gun stood in the steel bucket on the engine's hydraulic boom arm waiting to be lifted into the tree.

"Don't you dare hurt him," Herald seized the upper arm of the corporal, "he's not a cannibal."

The other patrolman smirked at Herald in disbelief as he picked through the bones at the base of the tree, searching for incriminating evidence that the bushman might have slipped a human or two into his diet.

"Stay out of the way," the corporal ordered, pulling free of Herald's desperate grip.

The bushman now crawled back down the swaying branch to escape the men in the lift. The fear in his eyes contrasted with an almost obscene pleasure in Vivian's. The thought that she was enjoying all this deepened Herald's sense of alienation from the narrow world in which his wife existed.

The corporal grew impatient chasing the bushman from branch to branch in the English walnut. He finally hoisted the tranquilizer gun and fired a dart into the bushman's dark thigh.

The bushmen's eyes widened with awe at this blue man's magic. He plucked the dart out of his leg, pondered it a moment, gazed at his sacred blowgun as though comparing it to the policeman's rifle and, finding it less than adequate, let it drop from his numb fingers. Then his arms turned rubbery. He could no longer hang onto his small world among the branches. He fell limply into the arms of the waiting yellow firemen who had manoeuvred under him in their bucket.

Herald watched with involuntary tears welling in his eyes as they lowered the unconscious bushman down from the tree and hauled him away, handcuffed, in the back seat of the corporal's black and white squad car with riot gun mounted on the dash. The lump in his throat felt like a tennis ball. He fought back his feelings. He didn't want to break down in front of everyone. One glimpse of Vivian steeled him against his own sentiment. He swallowed the lump and blinked back the tears.

After the firemen cleaned up and drove off in their immaculate machine, Vivian turned to him from the front porch. "That tree has been nothing but trouble around here. I'm calling someone tomorrow to come and get rid of it." She marched into the house triumphantly.

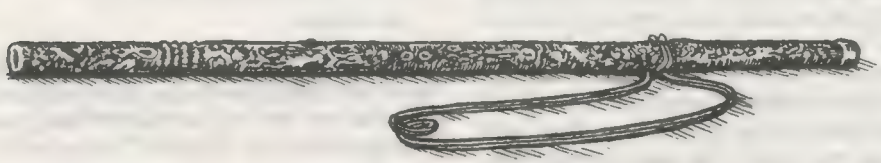
Herald walked over to the tree and searched the ground. Small scattered bones crunched under his feet. He squatted down to brush the bones, feathers and decaying squirrel skulls aside. There, half-covered with autumn leaves kicked-up by crisis-driven policemen and firemen, he found the blowgun. He took it into his hands and felt the smoothness of the polished wood, followed the carved lines with the tip of his finger. A sense of power surged through him, a power he'd never known before, something deep inside him stirring, awakening perhaps for the first time.

That evening, Vivian strode into their bedroom with her face plastered with cleansing cream and her hair up in God-awful pink curlers which made her whole head resemble an alien receiving station. Herald sat on the edge of the bed holding the blowgun reverently in his hands, stroking the polished wood with his long, slender fingers. He looked up and could not help thinking she looked more savage with her beauty aids than the bushman did with his painted face. He couldn't help but laugh.

"What's so funny?" Vivian huffed, kicking off her fluffy slippers and wiping the polish remover from her long nails, filed and sharpened like savage claws.

Herald said nothing. He just stroked the blowgun as if in trance, his fingers tracing the carved symbols. His eyes narrowed like a tiger's, the rhythmic fever of a tribal drumbeat rising in his blood. ❑

David Memmott has been published in *New Pathways*, *NRG* and *Star*Line*. As well as being the managing editor of *Ice River*, he also publishes the Wordcraft Speculative Writers Series, of which the latest is Conger Beasley Jr's *The Magic Deer*. He lives in Union, Oregon.



LONDON IS CALLING

T. Winter-Damon

& Don Webb

— Do you think it is only a paradox, the quaker librarian of pale verdure which permitted one to sample the mysteries most serious.

the platform like a predatory caterpillar nosing its way. Buck Mulligan's again heavy face eyed Stephen awhile. And feeling like an ingested food particle, Elspeth stepped from his pocket. His mobile lips read, smiling with new delight. A wild miscellany of adverts and wondered when the digestive

— Telegram! he said. Wonderful inspiration! Telegram! An essay which ended up with an exhortation to buy her. He sat on a corner of the unlit desk, reading aloud joyfully: Told her this was her station. She leapt from her seat incurring the immense debtorship for a thing done. Signed: Jonah's leviathan. She moved past automatic chocolate Green. Have you drunk the four quid? The aunt is going. De-Faced map and a poster for an erotic French Film which

the ship, lower Abbey street. O, you peerless mummer! O, smiling to herself she reached the bottom of the elevator. Joyfully he thrust the message and envelope into a pocket towards her. The escalator glided her to the next level. She

— It's what I'm telling you, mister honey, it's queer and looked like a Roman public convenience, another escalator it in. 'Twas murmur we did for a gallus potion would rouse an evening paper from the hunched, one-eyed man vending hour and two hours and three hours in Connery's sitting civil briskly along the street that could have been one of ten.

He waited!

have belonged anywhere else. The smell of the air, the traffic Sending us your conglomerations the way we too have our olfactory nerve endings which say, "London!" the pussful.

You're darned witty. Three drams of usquebaugh you drank London on her tongue. Her

feet met pavements that would

How much did I spend? O, a few shillings.

partly black and partly white, an enchantment and a spell. Wit. You could give your five wits for youth's proud livery where else in the world. You could find things in London. There be many mo. Take her for me. In pairing time. Jove, that which had come from Zelby was exchanged for a flat oblong Eve. Naked wheatbellied sin. A snake coils her, fangs in kiss of the subterranean locomotives. A train chuggled towards her asking. The mocker is never taken seriously when he is around a cabbage leaf. Doors opened like insectile air vents.

They talked seriously of mocker's seriousness.

On to the tube train. The door closed; she sat looking at

Then, his head wagging, he came near, drew a folded telegram - juices which would absorb her. She was reading an interesting history. Light. Favorite beer, when a sidelong glance through a grimy papal bull!

Moved quickly to the opening doors. The train disgorged her.

— The sentimentalist is he who would enjoy without vendors, the weighing machine which was out of order, a Daedalus. Where did you launch it from? The kips? No. College had attracted the pencils of some transvestite teenagers.

to call on your unsubstantial father. Telegram! Malachi Elevator felt a blast of mildly gritty air blowing down. You priestified kinchite!

paced across a curved area enriched with white tiles until it keened in querulous brogue: took her to the top. She handed in her ticket, and bought a sick. We were, Haines and myself, the time himself bought them vociferously to the London night: then she walked friar, I'm thinking, and he limp with leeching. Are we one thousand in the metropolis. It was a street which could not be waiting for pints apiece.

Fumes said, "London." Every carcinogenic particle that bombarded

And we to be there, mavrone, and you to be unbeknownst rumbling and the roar of the traffic, echoed and re-echoed tongues out a yard long like the drouthy-clerics do be fainting wings clattered, "London" in the air. There was a taste of "Stephen laughed."

only have been part of London. The metropolis held a magic harsh gargoyle face that wasted against me over our mess. All its own. They did things in London that happened for words, palabras. Oisin with Patrick. Faunman he met.

You could find things in London that you could find nowhere else.

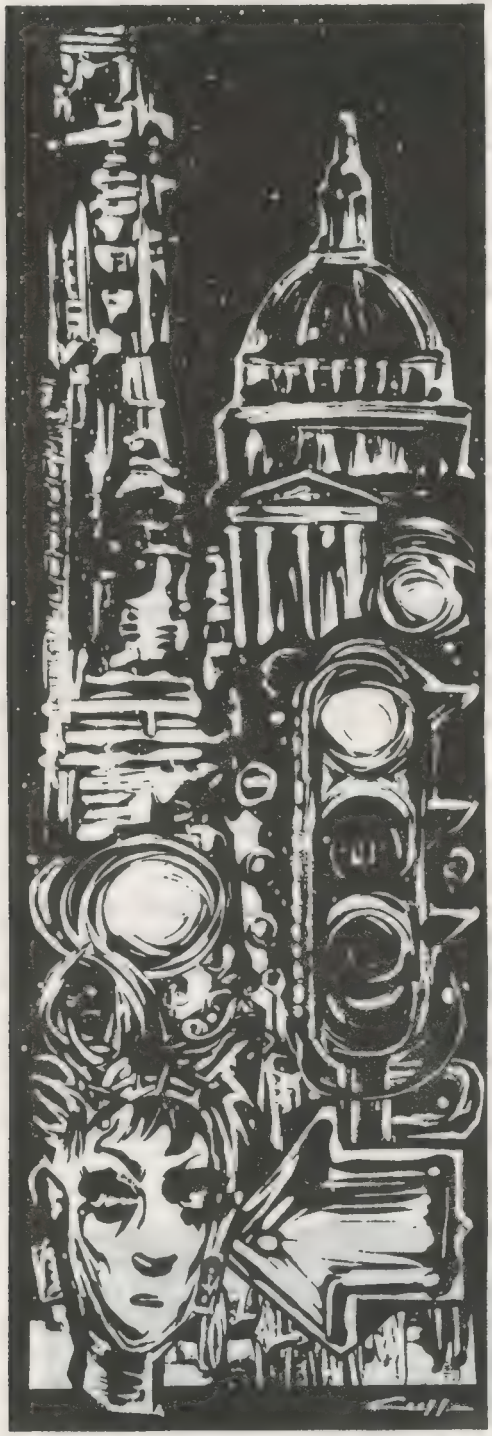
Is it true what they say?

Heilyn wonders to himself.

Can this be the destined hour? Someone. Himself. The door towards Cornwall is thrown open. No more to stay at Harlech. No more no more the feasting.

We. We who are the seven remnants. Carry to London our sad burden.

Big Ben thunders, and Stephen's face now runs with tears. He cries out something that



sounds like "Uther!" And three birds begin to sing a threnody.

On to Trinovantum. "Troja Nova," Brutus corrects. And Buck just tips his ale, wipes foam from his lips, and cautions, "E tu, Brute ..." To the seven, the head is far more favored than the brew. "Urdrawl," Elspeth mutters incoherently.

scent of malt vinegar tangs in his nostrils. You might say, "seven, freshly whetted," or you might not as the mood and moot would take you. In any event, greasy are the tabloid sheets, hot and a'drippin'

ALTERNATIVE TIMES, the headlines read. Reprinted there for all to see. (sea?) (C?). A witch and three other poets dally in the hot tub. One fancies himself a modern Arthur. Decadent. Not Excalibur. O, you peerless mummer!

the again heavy face cannot be read. But a young lass with emerald hair and razors dangling from each ear crosses against the traffic. Engrossed. A lorry nearly hits her. "Kaerlud!" the driver shouts. A sudden flash and her tome's title spells itself in bold print, *The Flame Trees of —*

Boy with orange-spiked hair and one silver hand is laying bricks, but the wall falls faster than he builds it

The Baker Street Irregulars. The Twenty-fourth Foot. And the Knights of the Garter. All march by waving the Magna Carta and dozens-upon-dozens of pink frilly knickers and a bottle of *Red Hackle*.

Himself. Or someone. Whispers, "It was an injury to his foot what did it ..."

"Caerlondon!" the conductor shouts. "Caerlondon! All aboard!"

One hundred years slide by, and the razor or scalpel glistens in the gaslights' eerie glow. Boy with silver hand works faster. Bricks crumble into dust, and the wind catches every word whispered in the realm. May Day comes as we stand and watch. And the scream curdles mothers' milk and sets the raven flapping.

Stephen buys another pint, downs it, then

shouts, "A place of splendid fame!"

Somewhere within the earth the Once and Future gives a sigh.

Somewhere within the sky the bombs fall again. And again.

The boy with the silver hand is troweling even faster.

— Telegram! he said. Wonderful inspiration. Telegram! —

Somewhere a head speaks of severance. Somewhere within the earth a head faces France forever and forever shoreward

A few farthings in the hand. And where to spend them, lad?

Stephen buys another pint. "London!" he toasts. Drains the mug and munches merrily upon the glass. "London!"

Could the shriek of May Day be the Concorde winging overhead?

"a poison dart, I'm told ..."

The streets dissolve around us. Flow and form again. A clerk in the Office of the Navy. An embezzler. An unsympathetic Mum stops wax into her ears and pushes her pram out in front of the bouncing wheels of carriages. Mob violence erupts. A crowd of Yorkshire schoolboys have a go at the curry vendors and the fortune tellers and every laundromat along the street.

"The White Eminence of London!" the conductor says, "by way o' the Walbrook n' the Fleet ..."

The Bobbies are out in force, swinging batons and bashing heads.

All seven duck on board for Piccadilly Circus and the Globe. Migrant red admirals flutter like a million tiny fans, swarming everywhere upon the Michaelmas. Hawks swirl in the central sky, obscuring all but one greedy crumb of sun. The eyed. The limes. The poplars. Elspeth shivers with delight and twirls her parasol.

The boy with the silver hand is mixing lime and sand. The bricks fall faster now

Brown rats and black. A covey of pigeons are consumed. House mice erupt from every drain and chink, what is the Piper doing here? It's the hedgehogs that's the blight to hear the story told by some.

Stephen lays his shillings down and tips another pint.

A breeze gusts in off the Thames and raises the young girls' skirts around their dimpled knees. The man in the stovepipe hat taps his cane briskly on the tarmac, throws open his folds of coat, and leaves himself exposed.

"Londinium!" the lorry driver shouts. "Londinium!"

the walls are scrawled with "A's" and "Hermes Psychopompus" in day-glo orange. "Ludd's Mill" is sprayed in eye-raping green across a churchfront. "Eight Miles High" is playing as a yellow Volkswagen passes by. And a longhaired man with purple-lensed granny glasses and paisley bell bottoms stares into the sun

Building sites. Railway banks. Neglected gutters. And Broken walls. Oxford ragwort and bracken colonize. An omnibus whirls by, skinheads leering from every window, jostling the passengers above

Trafalgar Square. St Paul's Cathedral. Victoria Station. The fog rolls in, and ghosts march silent toward the Hill.

— The boy with the silver hand salutes.

— Buck joins Stephen in yet another toast.

— Big Ben gongs another round.

— Disraeli tosses stock certificates to a crowd of visiting Panamanians and smugglers.

— Thomas More and Cromwell beckon from a passing Rolls.

And Anne Boleyn as a street peddler hawks her wares, "Fireworks! Fireworks for Guy Fawkes!" Masked children set the Parliament ablaze, begging plaintively, "a penny for the guy ...?"

The seven stand before the Tower. Three drams of usquebaugh. You drank London on her tongue

— Telegram! he said. Wonderful inspiration! Telegram!

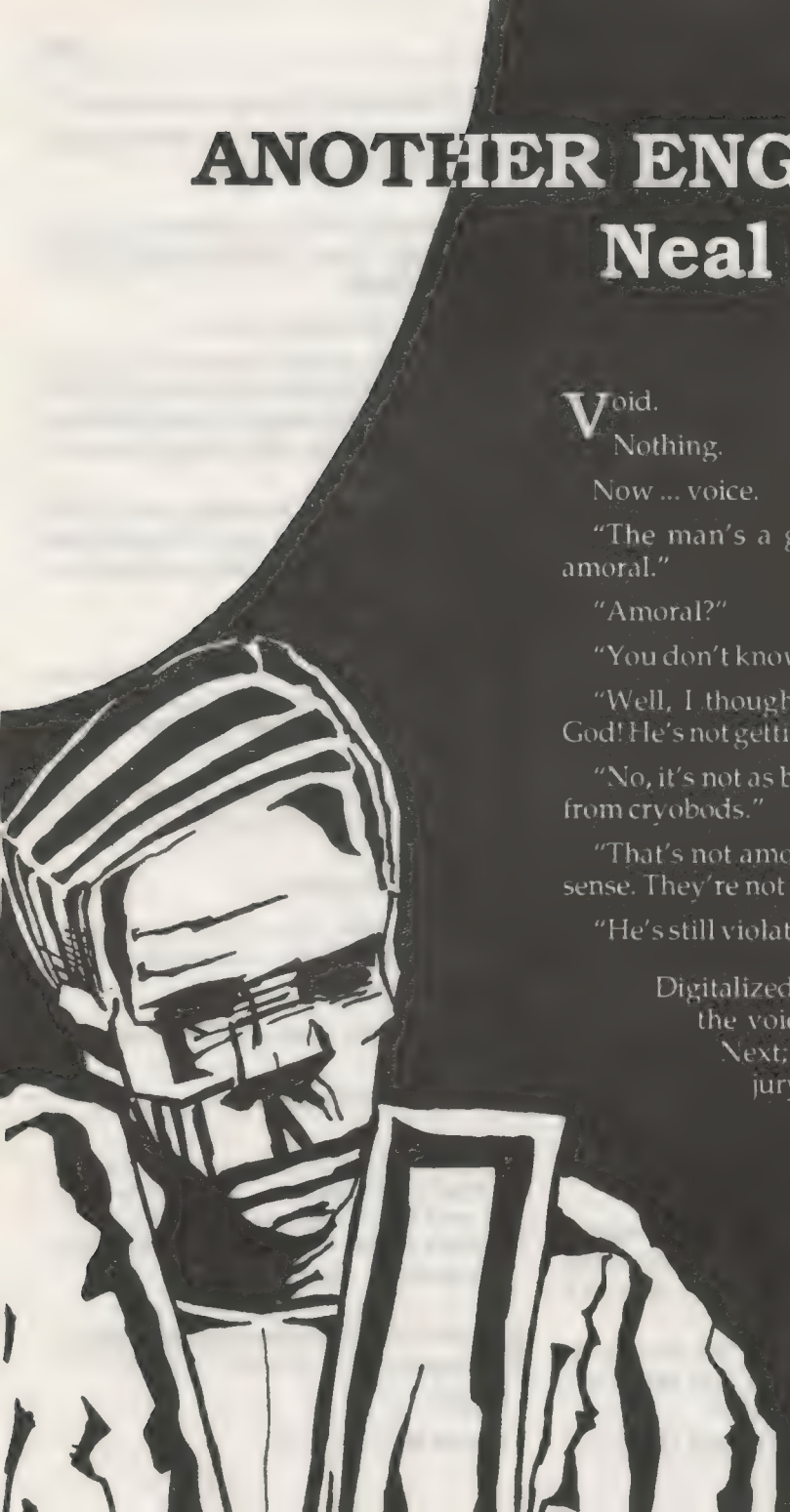
The fog swirls in from across the Thames. The quaker librarian heads homewards, humming "London Bridge is Falling Down ..."

"Stephen, m'lad," Buck begins. Belches loudly. Forgets his train of thought. Then falls asleep. ❑

American writers Don Webb and t. Winter-Damon will be no strangers to regular readers of *BBR*. They have both appeared in the magazine on numerous occasions, although this is the first time that they have collaborated in *BBR*. "London is Calling" appeared in the American experimental magazine *EOTU* in 1988, and was likely to have been included in *The Year's Best Fantasy Stories* had not the latter been discontinued by DAW. Even so, Don has still got a story in *The Year's Best Horror* this year, whilst Damon as ever is frenziedly working on solo material in addition to collaborations with Bruce Boston and other compatriots.

ANOTHER ENGLAND

Neal Asher



Void.

Nothing.

Now ... voice.

"The man's a genius, but totally amoral."

"Amoral?"

"You don't know his sources?"

"Well, I thought the organ farms. God! He's not getting the stuff from —"

"No, it's not as bad as that. It comes from cryobods."

"That's not amoral, that's common sense. They're not going to miss it."

"He's still violating their —"

Digitalized sound washes out the voices. Void closes in. Next; fear of physical injury and a game.

I am running, holding something. It is important that I get that something to a certain place. There is a momentary flash of vision; lights, short grass, and a giant in plastic armour standing before me. I realise I am eye to eye with this giant. Blackness.

"... this one, missed the ball completely and ran into the boundary. Like I said, cryo-tissue is unstable."

Vision: a dim-lit room filled with armoured giants like statues. Two men before me, their clothes like badly faked Edwardian dress. One man; short, thin, balding. The other; tall, thin, grey haired, and resting on a silver cane. Blackness.

An introspective voice: "Cryo-tissue is un-ordered, but its complexity gives greater *finesse* of control over the motor functions."

A wheezing voice: "I suppose at five hundred pounds an ounce for vat-grown it has ..."

Vision: the man with the silver cane alone. For his first word sound and vision are together, then darkness descends like a martinet parent.

"I sometimes wonder what constitutes sentience," says that voice of introspection. "Do you think as I think? What precisely is thought? Talian knows I use cryo-tissue and says we must check, sometime, to see if it is capable of self activation or activation without direct stimulation. He is strangely moral for such an astute politician ... Do your synapses fire outside the game? ... I wonder ... What kind and degree of stimulation would bring you fully to life?"

Vision comes back and I see him pacing before me. He looks troubled. He continues his monologue. Vision stays.

"If they do then I no longer have the right to control you. By law you are not brain-dead. You are alive even though you were dead. It's difficult."

Suddenly he turns and strikes me with his cane. I am aware that my eyes move. His expression becomes unreadable.

"So ... and thus ... resurrected to kill and damn moral issues. They, and neural issues."

Kill I think, and it is the first coherent thought I have had in a very long time.

First came the weakness and the heaviness in my lungs. Then came the braying cough and grey phlegm.

I will give up smoking ... I will ...

Antibiotics worked the first time, but I started smoking again and the bronchitis came back again, again and again. Eventually there came a time when the antibiotics did not work.

The crowd roars. Something shifts, jerks, thuds. There is the smell of new-mown grass, then a drowning sensation and loud digitalized sound.

Blackness.

"That's twice this week! I reckon it's time to open him up and have a look!" an angry voice, a confused voice. Then the secretive voice of Silver Cane.

"Perhaps you're right. The Mechs are sweeping the league. We can't afford any more foul-ups."

"I'll get the trolley, we ..."

A musty smell, like a cellar, the clunk of metal, a rattle of wheels ... movement.

Nothingness.

This time no space, but awareness of nothing.

Thoughts move sluggishly in my mind.

I'm sorry but there's little we can do," said the white-coated nemesis. "Riddled" was his next word and "three months" the time limit. I felt a lurch as if the world had been shifted from under my feet ... some time gone.

PAIN!! Screamingdentistdrillingbowel-tensingagony. A–g–o–n–y.

PAIN!!

"Jesus! He's moving!"

"Fix the straps! Quickly!"

Constriction. I fight against it. It is gone.

Vision: an operating theatre. I am sitting upright on an operating slab. Even from this position I am looking down on the two men.

Confusion. Panic. Dislocation.

I am up and moving. Silver Cane steps back out of the way. The balding man is before me with some kind of gun. There is a flash of green light, the smell of burning flesh, pain messages from my arm. I brush the man aside. He hits the wall about five feet from the ground, spattering blood like a corona. Confusion again. I see a door. It falls before me along with half the wall. I run and run. There is no thought or sentience, just the action of escape.

All my senses operate. Suddenly I am. But what where and how?

I am in a dark litter-choked alley, but it is like no alley I have ever seen before. Flickers of multi-coloured light brush walls of a glassy substance. The ground is matt-black. To my right, a square box with rounded corners, overflowing with rubbish. There is rubbish on the ground as well; screwed up cellophane and pieces of what looks like electrical hardware, melted and broken. This is all I see. This is the extent of my vision. I cannot move.

Sounds filter into the alley. Sounds of massive things shifting, the drone of power, of crowds of people, somewhere. The smells are of decay and metal, as in a scrap-yard.

Time passes.

"Well well." The voice is from my left. A shadow flows across the ground and suddenly there is a face before me. It is the face of a young girl; thin, with cropped blonde hair streaked with orange, a black stud in the left nostril of her narrow nose, black lip-stick on a rose-bud mouth, green eyes. Her hand comes up before my face; nails painted black and somehow shaped like claws. There is a thick metallic band around her wrist with digital displays, small screens, and touch-buttons. She rakes those claws towards my eyes but does not contact. I am unable to respond. She giggles then is gone. As what I imagine to be minutes drag into hours I open the door to encroaching darkness.

Perfect," says someone. It is a man's voice. I try to force vision back but instead get the sensation of movement. After a delay though I do get a momentary flash of sky, then the roof of some vehicle ... Movement again.

Man two: "This'll be a bit different from the war-tank. Ain't the Gengiants' code unbreakable?"

Man one: "We don't even have to try to break it, just reprogram his governor with a code of our own."

Man two: "Seems things are *running* our way at last."

Laughter.

Girl: "I found him. What y'gonna do with him?"

Man one: "Shut it Karel. You've been paid. There's enough endorphins in that case to keep you high for a year."

Girl: "I found him."

Man one: "And now he's ours."

Man two, laughing: "T's bodyguards are gonna be well pissed ...!"

Man one, angry: "Shut it!"

Silence for a while. The vehicle draws to a halt. There is a hiss, then the recognizable thud of a door closing.

Man two: "Will she keep her mouth shut?"

Man one: "Permanently, after she takes her first hit."

Laughter.

Man two: "Satras?"

Man one: "Yeah, another blow for freedom."

Darkness-blackness.

A static of digitalized sound fills my head. I am walking down a long corridor. At the end of the corridor is a steel door. On reaching

it I press a button. The door shoots up. I step inside and punch out the number 178. The door close. There is a sensation of movement. The door opens. Two men in grey uniforms look at me in shock then raise compact machine pistols. I feel subliminal flickers of pain. I grab hold of the two men and slam them together, bloodied and limp they fall. More corridor. A wooden door. No wooden door. A man standing up from a sofa, something black in his hands. Green light. Pain. I grab him. He is screaming and struggling but I cannot hear his screams. I take him to a window beyond which is starlit sky. My foot knocks a sheet of lucent plastic out into the night. Grabbing at nothing the man follows it and is gone.

Corridors.

Walking.

Satras." The name brings all my senses to the alert. I can see. I can hear. I can smell. I am in what looks like an abandoned tenement building. All around me are men and women making explosives, cleaning weapons, sleeping, eating, shitting and talking of freedom, death and necessary destruction. I turn my head, surveying the room, memorizing and cataloguing. I do not know why I do this thing.

"When did he say?" asks man two.

"A week, ten days," replies man one.

"We'll have time to take out the other three candidates then?"

"No, only Talian." A hand slaps my chest. "Lurch here is in need of repairs."

It is enough, darkness descends, but not in my mind.

Satras?

Talian?

I am preprogrammed again. Again, I am going to kill someone. I can see and hear but have no control over my actions.

I am walking along a country road. Above my head the sky is blue and impossible craft flash across it. I wonder how many years have passed in this land I now recognise as England, an England much like my own with elections, terrorists and impossible craft ... yet, I see a man screaming into the maw of darkness.

Ahead of me an iron gate comes into view with grey uniforms on either side of it. The crowd roars. I run, faster and faster. Wind hisses against my armoured skin.

"What the ...!" one of the guards shouts, then the gate crashes open as I hit it. There is the sound of accelerated machine-gun fire and pain rivets across my back. I do not slow. I continue up the gravel path to the porch and wooden door of a sprawling Jacobean mansion. The door is a subliminal storm of splintered timbers and I am through. Ripping up carpet I come to a halt in a hall lined with Grecian statuettes, orient, go charging up a staircase five steps at a time. On a landing I orient again, head for the fifth door down, smash it open. A bedroom. I scan. No one there. I back out, then charge down the landing to another door, smash it open. Within, two men wait behind what looks like a tripod-mounted cannon. One of the men is tall and fair-haired, his expression one of controlled fear. The other is Silver Cane. I freeze. I cannot move.

"No need for the laser, Mr Prime Minister –" laughter "– I told you my instruction to his deep programming would stop him."

"There was an element of doubt, dear chap," Talian replies. "What now?"

"Now we slip their program and leave my original to run its course. You had better lay low for a while, you're supposed to be dead."

"And after?"

"Total mind-wipe unfortunately, programmed in. If it comes to an enquiry we'd look pretty dirty."

Darkness.

Talian nods. Silver Cane taps out something on a wrist-band much like Karel's.

I turn.

I go.

Satras is here," someone says and I am instantly alert. Surreptitiously I look around. All is as before. All the faces are present. I recognise every one.

Man one and man two lead another man towards me. This man has the look of a business man, a tycoon perhaps, or a politician. There is nothing of the revolutionary about him. He approaches me.

"So this is our eminently effective Gengiant," he says.

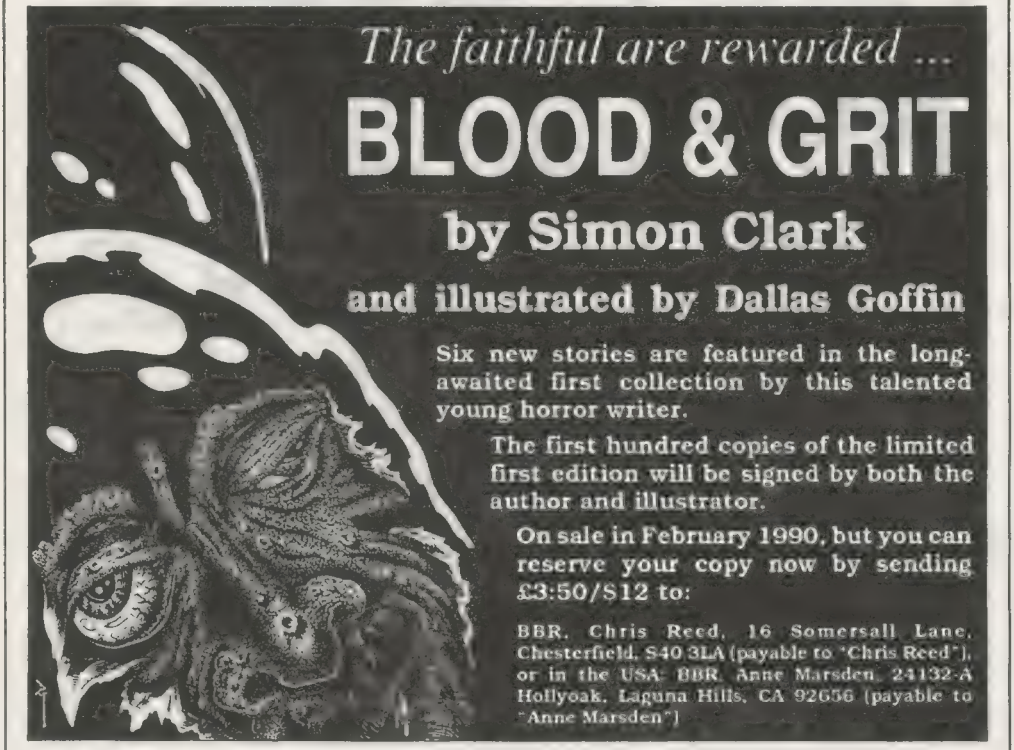
Man two laughs. "Left Talian splattered all over his living room apparently."

Satras laughs as well, then stops abruptly. I have my hand around his throat. His face reddens. I shake him and hear bones snapping, then I drop him. Man two tries to get out of my way. With his head deformed he joins Satras. Man one shatters a window like a bloody comet. Then I am moving, faster and faster, killing and killing. There is blood, bone, a red foliage of torn and broken bodies. Bullets and fire rip me. But I kill and kill and a counter in my head ticks off each life, each death. Then, at last, I stop. Volition is mine. I leave by the back stairs.

In an alley-way I crouch by the putrefying corpse of a girl with black finger-nails like claws. Searching for me are men in vehicles with such bright lights.

I wait for darkness. ❑

Neal Asher was born in 1961 in Billericay in Essex. Having dropped out of engineering and become self-employed, he currently has the first novel of a trilogy doing the rounds. This is his first appearance in *BBR*.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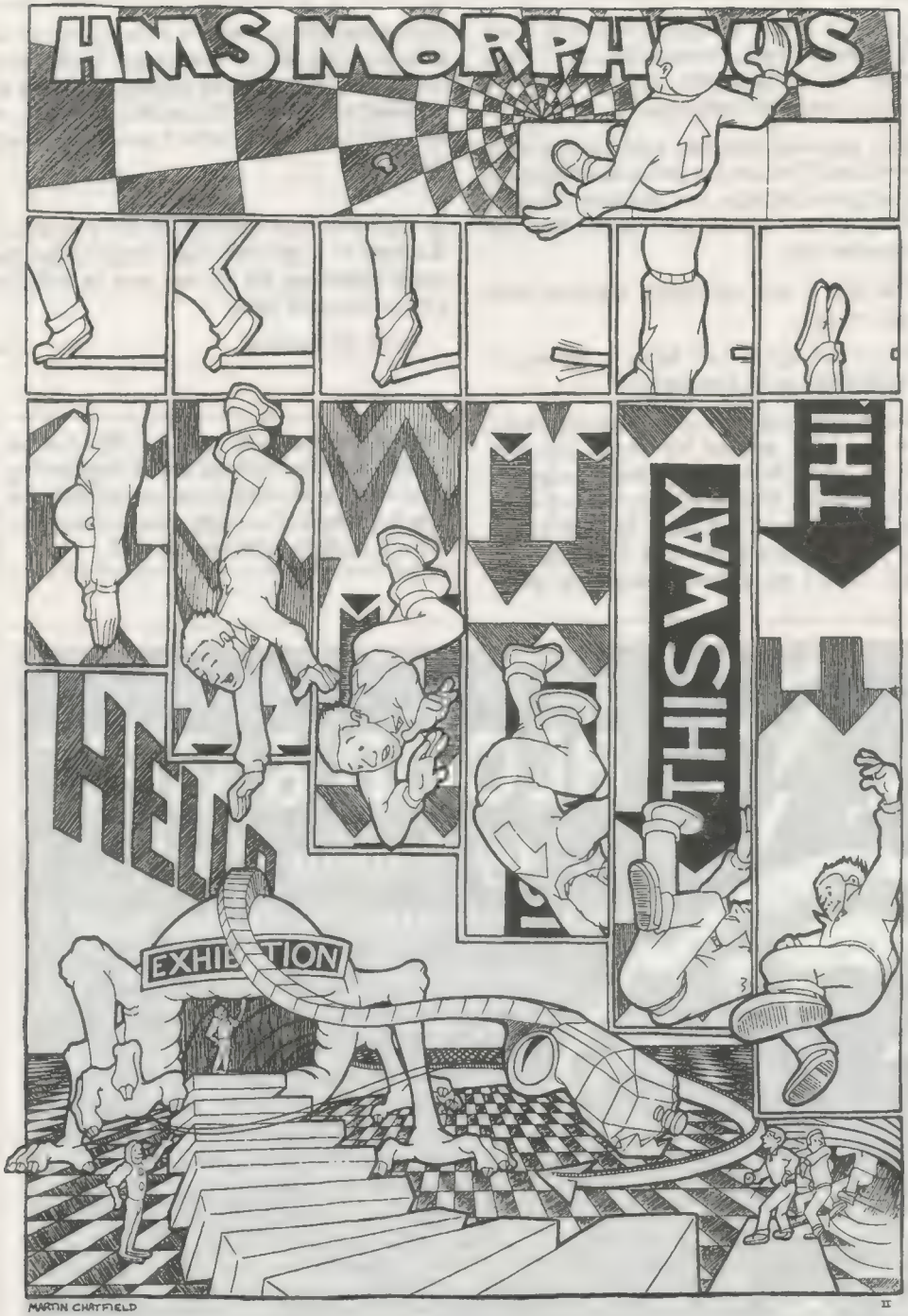
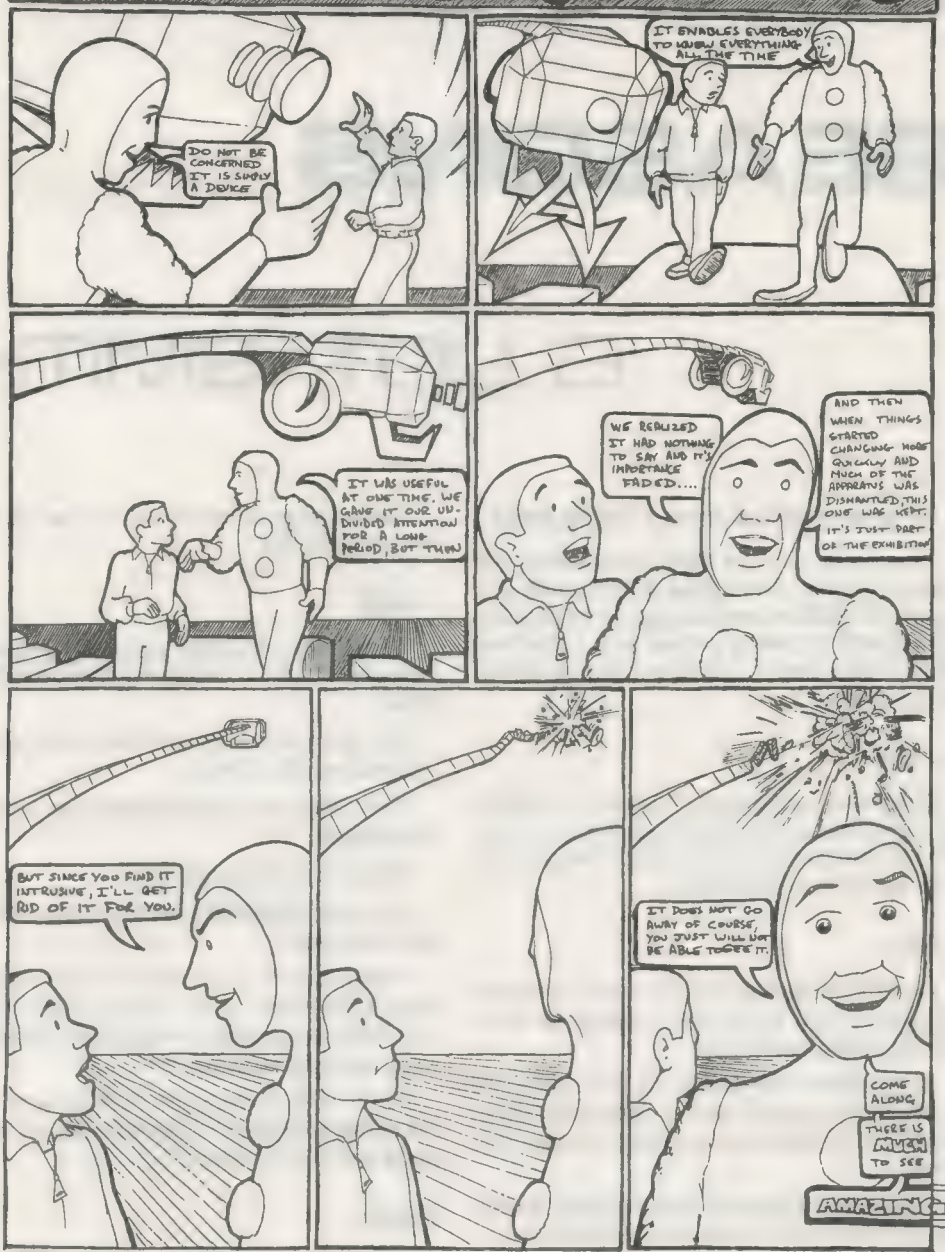


MARTIN CHATFIELD

HMS MORPHEUS


DO NOT BE CONCERNED IT IS SIMPLY A DEVICE
IT ENABLES EVERYBODY TO KNOW EVERYTHING ALL THE TIME
IT WAS USEFUL AT ONE TIME. WE GAVE IT OUR UNDIVIDED ATTENTION FOR A LONG PERIOD, BUT THEN
WE REALIZED IT HAD NOTHING TO SAY AND IT'S IMPORTANCE FADED....
AND THEN WHEN THINGS STARTED CHANGING MORE QUICKLY AND MUCH OF THE APPARATUS WAS DISMANTLED, THIS ONE WAS KEPT. IT'S JUST PART OF THE EXHIBITION
BUT SINCE YOU FIND IT INTRUSIVE, I'LL GET RID OF IT FOR YOU.
IT DOES NOT GO AWAY OF COURSE, YOU JUST WILL NOT BE ABLE TO SEE IT.
COME ALONG, THERE IS MUCH TO SEE
AMAZING

MARTIN CHATFIELD.

III

To be continued ...

ASPHALT SEASONS

ELLIOT SMITH

A planet lurches round three stars.

From orbit, an alien capsule transforms the planet's surface. Geological features fade like shadows. Visible warmth begins to waver from the planet's mutating surface as it turns into asphalt and tarmac, a strange summer falling on the world.

T–1600

The astronauts have only been on the planet for a few minutes. They are dazed by the crash, spread like crosses on the desert. Two leprous dogs watch from a distance.

T–800

Having recovered from the crash, the three astronauts wish to leave the planet, as their landing was not planned.

They mount the ladder to the command module; the dogs still watch. They strap themselves into a rocket-boosted coffin and grin like idiots.

Buttons are depressed, levers pulled, checks made. No take-off. No ignition. Nothing.

They resign themselves to the surface, resenting gravity.

T–400

The asphalt stretches away. Some skeletal ruins stand on the periphery of their field of vision.

The first astronaut is Mahler; the second, Waites; the third, Davies.

They stand in a line like prisoners before a firing squad.

Waites is ever the optimist.

"Oh, well, looks like we'll have to wait for the relief team."

"They don't know where we are," hisses Davies. "*We* don't know where we are. It just looks like tarmac in every direction. No sea, no trees, nothing but tarmac."

"Let's walk to the ruins. Perhaps we'll find the native race there," suggests Waites. Davies just gives him a black stare.

T–200

They watch the heat the way nodding dogs

watch a receding road. Discarded space-suits are scattered on the floor like rag dolls and goldfish bowls.

T–100

Mahler stares at the clouds, gathering like Guy Fawkes and his associates. They seem familiar. Déjà vu? he asks himself. He tells the others nothing.

The clouds are grey beyond belief, almost solid, almost black. He can sense their tensile strength.

They have made no progress towards the ruins – it is too hot. The air cakes their lungs; their breathing is shallow.

"Were there two dogs?" asks Waites. "I thought I saw two dogs."

"Mirages," Mahler replies bluntly.

"Where are we?" Waites asks, expecting no answer.

"Nowhere." Mahler scratches his nose as he speaks, a subtle gesture indicating his lie. He knows this world. He has seen it before, in his dreams.

T–50

The clouds hang like a duplicate of the plains, a globe of tarmac around tarmac, a heavy black Sistine Chapel.

The astronauts feel as if they are burning. Waites seems nervous; Davies twitches like an epileptic.

"The heat," he whispers anxiously. "I can't stand it." With a sudden spurt of movement, he claws at his throat. Perhaps he is trying to tear out bigger nostrils so he can breathe.

The others watch and do nothing.

T–25

When Waites speaks, his voice shatters the static air: "I can see something. Look!"

Only Mahler pays attention. He follows Waites' finger to a lump in the asphalt.

It resembles their ship.

T–12.5

"Mahler, another ship was lost, wasn't it?"

Mahler nods.

"Their last report: it was the same as ours?"

"Yes." Mahler nods again.

"A large black planet, orbiting between three stars in chaotic motion. The surface covered in tarmac, or asphalt, or something."

Mahler nods, then picks up the thread of the conversation: "I wonder who covered the surface. There seems to be no life here."

He looks at the unconscious form of Davies, lying among the suits like a ventriloquist's dummy, mouth open in mid-sentence.

The heat seems to be shaping itself into recognizable substance.

T–6.25

Mahler gropes in his mind for the imagery of his dreams, his memory enhanced by the fact that he is sitting in the centre of it.

In the primal depths of his brain, he finds the answer.

He realises that this is the fate of man.

As Mahler raises his head from thought, Waites is staring at ghostlike figures swimming in the heat. Cars cough gas into the sky, bloating the clouds. Waites tries to draw more oxygen, biting at the air.

"This is the future." Mahler's eyes narrow as he speaks. "Somehow, this planet has accessed the thoughts stored in our neocortexes. Then it redesigned its own surface in accordance with the destiny we hold there."

"What?" gasps Davies. "How can you know that? We're dying and you discuss the technical aspects of the planet."

"The implications are incredible." Mahler smiles to himself, as if recalling a private joke. "A planet creating matter from thought."

"Shut up, will you? Just shut up." Davies falls back again.

T–3.125

Cars burn on the asphalt. The wrecks of aircraft twist like lovers. A pram on its side spills dead sea birds, black with oil.

The height of summer approaches.

Mahler thinks he sees his mother, climbing up the side of their ship. He tries to shout and tell her that he isn't inside, but his voice is only a croak and she simply melts into the contours of the vehicle.

T–1.5625

The mechanism of memory is also a mechanism of prophecy.

"Maybe to do with the triple star. A conjunction or something." Mahler hammers the last nail into Davies with spiteful relish.

T–0.78125

Underneath them, a prophet reads.

War and pollution. Spacecraft vainly clutching at stars. The human race falling in on itself, pushing itself back to the womb of Earth.

T–0.390625

The time approaches. They watch the sky as the cloud begins to disintegrate.

The ghost drivers dissolve in self-cremation.

"How do you know these things, Mahler?"

T–0.1953125

Each second seems like an hour as they wait for the cloud to burst. Only filth-strewn wreckage remains.

T–(1/infinity)

They stare insanely at each other. Outside the tarmac globe of sky, the stars tempt and spurn the planet with gravity.

Davies has ripped his own jugular open.

Waites prays for a saviour.

Mahler smiles at the sky.

T

The future reaches its apex. The sky opens and asphalt falls. It fills their mouths and other apertures; it settles and hardens on their skin; traps destiny within their skulls.

T+1

Three bumps in the asphalt, eyes and minds closed forever.

Transformed into new futures with each passing traveller. ❑

Elliot Smith was born in 1970. He has spent his whole life in Spalding in Lincolnshire, although he started at the University of Kent in Canterbury in October 1989. He has had stories printed in *Opus*, *Auguries* and *New Moon*, with more upcoming in *Works* and *Nerve Gardens*. This is his first appearance in *BBR*.

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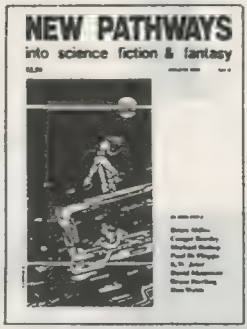

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DEVIL'S ADVOCATE

David William Sheridan

Little rivers of sweat tumbled from Randolph's scalp and attempted to run freely down his soot-smeared face, but evaporated immediately in the super-intense heat. His naked body was a cherry red mass of blisters, his skin tender to the point of agony. And he was not in a good mood.

"Alright, creeps," he bellowed through his discomfort. "Get in that fire!"

Of the long line of unclothed men, women and children cowering before him, none moved to obey his order, to step into the screaming furnace where piled coals glowed white. Instead they merely stared at him, their mouths hanging open, their eyes standing out in jumbled incomprehension and shock. By now, Randolph thought, they had probably worked out what was happening to them and where they were, yet still they could not believe he was really asking them to step into a white-hot furnace. New Arrivals were always like that. What they needed was something to spur them on. With a wicked twist of his lips, Randolph turned the flame-thrower on the first few and let them have it.

They screamed, of course; they always screamed as their flesh caught fire and they suffered the first searing pain of their punishment. They became human torches, screaming, dancing, turning fast pirouettes with their burning arms outstretched. Randolph lifted a grease-blackened iron bar with a spike on the end and used it to push and poke the dancers into the furnace, where they fizzed like sausages in their own juices.

"Okay!" he said, turning back to where the rest of the line stood quivering and threatening them with the 'thrower. "In!" With an understandable lack of enthusiasm, the first few moved forward and stepped into the flaming coals. Immediately, they began to burn, but Randolph kept the line moving fast, so that every person was practically shoving the one ahead of him into the furnace. He didn't listen to their cries and protests but herded them along, applying a firm shove here and there where he judged it necessary.

"No, no! There's been a mistake!" a shrivelled old man screeched, stalling a few feet before the glowing furnace entrance and interrupting the flow of the whole line. The man's face was a mask of utter terror and the tears were drying up in his eyes as he shed them. "I know where we are!" he cried desperately. "Please, let me speak to ... to Him!"

"He's busy, grandad!" Randolph spat. "And He doesn't make mistakes! In!" The man continued to protest and refused to budge. Randolph cursed and incinerated him with the flame-thrower, tipping him in with the rest. He had a schedule to keep. He didn't need this aggravation.

The line moved smoothly again until Randolph saw that there were only a half dozen people left. With a pleased grin, he kicked, punched and threw these last few into the furnace, then aimed a long sheet of fire in on top of them for good measure. "You can fry but you can't die!" he called in after them, a catchy little phrase he'd picked up somewhere since he'd first arrived. The people in the furnace had already been reduced to quivering, black, shapeless masses by the heat, masses that still tried to shriek despite no longer having any throats. Randolph felt nothing for them.

He had a few minutes now to relax, for the next torture wasn't due to begin for a while. That was why he'd pushed the New Arrivals so hard. He'd needed these few minutes to himself. Slowly, he sauntered past the furnace, the hot ground beneath him toasting the flesh of his feet. When he'd first arrived, it had been agony just to walk, but he was pretty well used to it by now.

Presently, he came to the edge of a steep precipice that fell away for a straight half mile down to a vast open plain. From here, Randolph could look down over the entire expanse of the seven thousand, eight hundred and twelfth level of Hell. As usual, everything was burning fiercely.

Coughing the sulphur smoke out of his parched lungs, he peered down through the thick clouds, his eyes travelling over wide fields of fire and settling briefly on the figures that moved within them. Most were human, their bodies cooking in the heat, their roasted flesh coming away in big, black chunks. Other, larger figures loomed among them, lashing out indiscriminately with far-reaching cat-o'-nine-tail whips. These were the demons, the true inhabitants of Hell. With their fangs, horns and long, pointed tails, they were everything Randolph had ever supposed a demon to be, and they were impervious to the fire and the heat.

There was a sudden buzzing overhead, and Randolph looked up to see the now familiar bombers coming in for a dive. He watched as they dropped their napalm bombs and could almost feel the air being sucked out of his lungs as these exploded in a long line of fire down on the plain. Napalm had only been introduced to Hell after the demons had watched the Americans use it in Vietnam. They'd been very impressed, he'd heard, and made immediate arrangements for regular bombardments of it. That was one thing Randolph had to say for the demons. They may have been big, ugly, sadistic bastards, but they appreciated a good idea when they saw it.

Something white-hot struck Randolph's naked behind, bursting several large blisters and leaving a dark scorch mark that went up towards his back, and he leapt into the air and howled. "Heinrich, you lousy son-of-a-bitch!" he yelled angrily. "Be careful with that damned firewhip!"

"Sorry!" Heinrich Himmler apologised from behind his smoke-stained spectacles, then turned his attention back to his own line of New Arrivals and began alternately lashing them and cursing them fluently in German.

"Little nazi bastard, did it on purpose!" Randolph grumbled under his breath, touching the still smoking whipscar tenderly with his fingertips and heading back to the furnace where his own New Arrivals were still burning. Behind him he could hear the bombers dropping more napalm on the plain.

When he got back to the furnace, Randolph turned a large iron wheel that burned his hands, and the glowing coals immediately began to cool. As they did so, the scorched wreckage that was the New Arrivals started to repair themselves of the damage that the flames had done, and within minutes they were whole humans again. None of them yet found the strength to stand, but lolled on the still-hot coals. Some of them vomited, but it dried and evaporated quickly.

"Alright, you pieces of sewage!" Randolph said loudly, standing at the furnace door. "That

was only a taste of what you'll be getting over the next few days. You're in Hell now, and the punishment doesn't stop, not for a minute. You each had your chance, back there on earth, and you blew it. Now your souls belong to Satan, and this is His way of letting you know it!" He made sure that his voice was harsh and unmerciful enough to carry the message across, not betraying the fact that he himself had been a New Arrival Sinner only three years before. But of course, he had been really bad, while he'd lived: a mass-murderer with a cruel sadistic streak. The demons had spotted his potential right away, and so he had been put to work up here instead of ... of being sent down to the plain!

"But ... but I was a *nun*!" someone in the group called out, crying.

Randolph ran his eyes over them and picked out the source of the call, a short, thin woman, middle aged and with a flat chest. "Obviously not a very good one!" he quipped, and reached over to where his firewhip hung. "Okay, on your feet!" he bellowed, the whip in his hand. "No rest for the wicked!" He cracked it expertly, as he'd been taught to do, and sparks shot out and landed on the nearest Sinner. The man jumped to his feet and brushed at them frantically, but they burned big black spots on his skin. The others got the message and pulled themselves to their feet.

"Where are we going?" someone asked meekly.

"To the acid baths," Randolph replied, and lashed the speaker. The line shunted forward with wails and moans and he jogged along beside. Whenever he saw a pretty young girl he gave her a whipping across the breasts and buttocks, leaving terrible burns. He had always enjoyed mutilating young flesh.

The acid baths loomed ahead, huge uncovered vats sunken into the floor of Hell in which bubbled a steaming green liquid. Randolph did not know whether it was an earth acid, like sulphuric or hydrochloric, or something special the demons had cooked up themselves. Whichever, he had seen what it could do and he didn't fancy falling into it. The New Arrivals, of course, had no choice.

He chose a bath and guided his Sinners towards it. Off to his left, Heinrich Himmler already had half his own line in the acid and was busy whipping the rest in. Little toe-rag! Randolph thought. If Himmler hadn't been so far away, he might have sidled over himself and pushed the balding nazi into the vat. Then he'd lean over and say "Sorry!"

As they neared the vat he'd singled out for his line, Randolph saw that there was a figure up ahead, waiting for them to arrive. Coming closer, he realised that it was Babroth, the demon who was his direct superior. He greeted the demon with a low bow while the people in the line shrunk back in horror.

Babroth was about ten feet tall and almost as broad. His belly was a huge paunch that hung a foot or so below his shaggy waist. Like most demons, his legs were goat's legs. His arms, treelike, were covered with a coarse black hair that never singed, no matter how hot it got.

"Master!" Randolph addressed him.

"Randolph!" Babroth returned the greeting, his voice a beastlike growl from somewhere deep in his inhuman throat. "Are these today's New Arrivals?" the demon asked.

"Yes," Randolph nodded.

"How are they coming along?"

"Oh, they're learning, Master, they're learning," then, to the line, and with an accompanying crack of the whip, "Aren't you?" There were hurried nods and murmurs of assent.

Babroth nodded and tugged at his oily beard, then he stretched out a finger from which a white flame shot, neatly burning the faces off the line of one hundred or so Sinners.

"Nice one, Master!" Randolph said, as the New Arrivals fell screaming to their knees, fingering lipless mouths and empty eyesockets.

"I thought so," said Babroth, satisfied.

"Is there anything I can do for you, Master?" Randolph inquired.

"Ah, yes," the demon replied. "You're wanted upstairs."

Randolph stiffened. "You mean ... ?" His finger pointed straight up and Babroth nodded.

"What ... what do you think He wants?" he asked, swallowing hard.

"I don't know," the demon replied casually. "Maybe He wants to send you somewhere cooler, or somewhere hotter."

Randolph gulped. "You mean there are hotter places than this?" He had heard that there were, but he hadn't wanted to believe it. The thought of being sent to one of them was more than he could take.

"Don't worry about it," Babroth told him. "It's through that door, over there. I'm to take over here until you come back." Randolph handed him the whip and turned to go. "If you come back," Babroth added casually.

The door led Randolph to the foot of a wide stairway that spiralled up and up, apparently forever. To add to that, the steps were designed for demon comfort, and were just a little too tall for a man to climb with ease. "Shit!" he said aloud to himself. "I've got to go up there?"

"No!" rasped a voice from off to his right, and Randolph found a demon there only about a foot taller than himself. From the large breasts and the lack of certain other physical features, he saw that this demon was female. "There are seven thousand, eight hundred and twelve floors to climb," the demoness said, "and there's ten miles between each floor. It would take you twenty years to reach the top. I think you'd better come this way." She indicated an elevator standing open nearby.

Randolph nodded wordlessly and entered the elevator. The demoness followed him in, pressed a button on the wall so that the doors slid closed, and then they were rising.

Randolph looked about him and found himself thinking that the elevator would not have looked out of place in a modern office building, were it not for the still-uncomfortable heat. It was clean and metallic, though a bit taller, perhaps, than a normal elevator so that the full-sized male demons could use it. Above the doors was an indicator that showed their rise through the many levels of Hell. He saw that they were making rapid progress, already near the six thousandth floor.

"Er, do you know why I'm, er, wanted?" Randolph ventured to ask of the demoness, and only then noticed the way she was regarding his nakedness. In the close quarters of the lift, her twelve inch height advantage made her seem to tower over him. Almost unconsciously, Randolph moved his hand to cover his private parts.

The demoness's own hand shot out, grabbing Randolph by the most sensitive area of his anatomy. He let out a little squeak, for her 'hand' was actually a sort of claw, with inch-long talons crowning every finger, and she was not straining herself to be overly gentle.

"How do you humans manage it," she asked, "with such tiny implements?" Her voice was similar to the noise made by the engine of an old Ford truck Randolph had used to own.

"We, er, we ... get along!" he squeaked in reply.

"I've half a mind to rip the whole lot off," the demoness said, her fangs glistening with hot saliva. "They'd make a great earring!"

"P-p-p-please d-d-don't d-do that!" Randolph squealed desperately as the taloned hand tightened. "*He* ... wouldn't be pleased!" The hand relaxed, then let him go.

"You're right," she said, half growling. A bell tinged and Randolph saw that they had reached the top floor, Level Zero. The elevator doors slid open and he leapt out, spinning to be sure she wasn't following. "Catch you on the way back, maybe," the demoness said, as they slid closed again.

Randolph found himself standing on plush, deep-pile carpet. The walls of the room he was in were of polished walnut, and to one side of him there was a bookcase stacked with expensive-looking volumes. He also noticed that it was no longer hot. The temperature was normal – cool, even. Slowly, he turned to face the presence that he somehow knew was behind him.

The man was just that – a man. Middle aged,

he sat behind a desk in a leather easy chair and puffed with satisfaction on a big cuban cigar. But when Randolph looked into his eyes, he knew he was facing Satan.

"Have a seat!" the Devil said, indicating a second easy chair over on Randolph's side of the desk. Randolph moved hesitantly, sat, and said nothing. Satan puffed on His cigar some more, sending plumes of smoke spiralling towards the ceiling. Randolph's eyes shifted to the large, uncurtained window behind where the Master of Evil sat, through which he thought he saw the lights of tall buildings not far away in the darkness. If he hadn't known better, he might have said he was on the top floor of a Manhattan skyscraper.

"You're Randolph!" Satan said, reaching forward and offering Randolph a cigar from a pine box.

"Er, yes," Randolph managed, refusing the cigar. He would have loved to smoke it, but there was a dry, sulphurous taste in the back of his throat now that he'd left the fiercely burning floors of Lower Hell behind.

"I have chosen you for a very special task," Satan said, pointing with His cigar to where Randolph sat.

"T-thank you," Randolph said uncertainly. "What is it?"

Satan smiled broadly. "Soon enough, my boy, soon enough!" He said. "But first, let me ask you a few questions. Do you like it in Hell?"

Randolph was caught off balance. Was he supposed to like it? If he said he did, he might be sent somewhere worse, where he most definitely wouldn't like it. On the other hand, if he said no ... Satan might not be pleased.

"I ... like it about as much as it's possible to like it," he compromised.

Satan smiled again. It was not a nice effect. It was like the way a tiger might smile before he eats you. "Good!" he said. "But it is hot, isn't it?" He rose from His chair and paced to the large window, His back now turned to Randolph.

"Hot as Hell!" Randolph found himself saying, before he realised the pun.

Satan turned again, laughing. "What would you say if I offered you a place where it wasn't so hot? Somewhere where a good worker might be allowed to indulge in some good old human vices – food, sleep!" He looked down at the cigar in His hand and must have viewed it as a phallic symbol. "Sex!"

"I'd ... like that!" Randolph said, secretly wondering what he'd have to do to get it.

"It can be arranged," Satan said. "There are levels of Hell where only minor punishment is meted out, places where the Sinners have hardly enough sin on their souls to cover a stamp. A good, loyal worker could be happy there."

Randolph could only nod.

"Good!" the Devil said. "Good! Now here's what you have to do." He reached into a drawer of His desk and produced a small white envelope, sealed, and handed it to Randolph. "I want you to deliver this to someone, someone very special. I don't want anyone else to get it, understand? It has to be delivered into the hand of the one I say."

Randolph nodded again. "Who?"

Satan smiled. "God!" He said.

"You mean ... You mean ... ?"

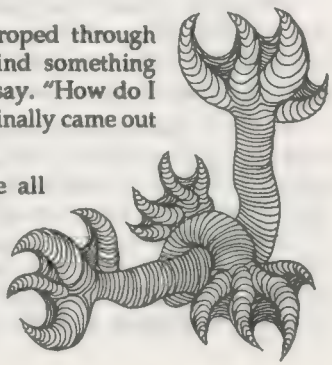
"I mean you have to go to Heaven," Satan stated, coming over and placing a firm hand on Randolph's shoulder. "Personal delivery, that's what I want. Nothing less will do. Of course, I'd go myself but ... well, I don't have very much power up there, and the Creator's not above pulling a fast one to try to win the War Between Good And Evil. You'll be okay, though. Just deliver the letter."

Randolph groped through his shock to find something meaningful to say. "How do I get there?" he finally came out with.

"I'll arrange all that!" Satan promised.

"And getting back?"

The Devil's



eyes narrowed. "Just come back to the spot where you arrive, after you deliver the letter, and I'll bring you back."

Randolph nodded.

"And one more thing! Don't be tempted by anything you see up there. Your place is down here, and believe me you've got a great future ahead of you."

Randolph nodded again.

"Right! Come over here!" the Great Deceiver indicated a spot near the window. Randolph did as he was bidden and Satan moved away. Randolph could now see clearly that the lights he'd spotted earlier really were skyscrapers, that the skyline really did look like Manhattan at night, then, suddenly, he was falling.

Randolph landed on his backside with a bump. He found himself sitting on what appeared to be an endless white plain, with nothing visible but a large gateway situated about a hundred yards to his left. "The Pearly Gates!" he murmured, stupefied. This was one sight he'd never believed he would ever see.

Pulling himself to his feet, and checking that Satan's letter was still in his hand, he strolled towards the gateway. As he approached, he saw that there were figures standing near it, all of them dressed in immaculately clean white robes. The sight of them reminded Randolph just how awful he himself must have looked, naked and soot-smeared, covered from head to foot in blisters and burns. But there was nothing he could do about it so he walked towards them. They saw him coming and moved as a group out to meet him.

"Welcome, my son!" their leader greeted. He was an elderly man with white hair and a neat beard. Two of those who followed him were also oldish men, the other was a young woman.

"Hello," Randolph replied, swallowing hard. The woman was beautiful, and her robe so fine as to be almost see-through. She smiled alluringly at him and he felt the beginnings of an old, familiar reaction somewhere below where his belt should have been. He suppressed it, with difficulty, not least because, standing there naked, it would be obvious as ...

well, obvious as Hell.

"Where have you come from?" the old man with the beard asked him, forcing his attention off the young lady.

"I, er ... downstairs!" Randolph replied, the best way he could think of describing the place without actually naming it.

"From earth!" the old man said.

"No!" Randolph felt his hand being forced. "From Hell!"

The old man released a little gasp and the faces of the others, including the girl, seemed to drop. "What ... what are you doing here, then?" the bearded man demanded.

"Sat–" he went to say, then changed his mind. "I was sent with a message for God." He held up the envelope so that they could all see it.

"Oh," said the old man. "I'll see that he gets it, then," and he reached out to take the envelope. Randolph snatched it back.

"I have to deliver it personally," he said. "Strict instructions!"

The old man's face hardened for a moment, then he nodded and indicated that Randolph should follow him. He walked towards and through the Pearly Gates, which were not pearly at all, but seemed to have been cast in solid gold, and Randolph was sorry to see that the others, including the girl, remained outside. He

looked back to where she stood with the other two, watching him, and suddenly a tremendous feeling of love and affection came over him for her. She seemed almost to know, and she smiled.

The old man – Randolph presumed he was Saint Peter, but didn't ask – led the way into Heaven proper, which involved following a long path beyond the gate and then passing through a thick white mist. Randolph was pleasantly surprised to find that the mist was cool and comfortable, contrasting completely with the black sulphur fumes that he'd become so used to. And beyond the mist lay the first valley of Heaven.

"I'll have to leave you here," Saint Peter, or whoever he was, said. "Just keep going across the valley and you should find Our Lord God around somewhere. If you can't find Him, just ask someone." Then he turned and disappeared again into the mist.

Randolph looked down on Heaven. "Holy ... !" he began an exclamation, but couldn't find a word that would do. It was beautiful.

He was high up on the valley wall, which sloped down gently to a plain crossed by a meandering blue river. There was a forest off to one side which seemed to contain every kind of tree that ever existed and some that had surely never known the soil of earth. There were bushes laden with every kind of fruit, and every kind of bird and animal that Randolph had ever heard of seemed to be there somewhere. The animals grazed or lolled about lazily, but none of them made any move to attack or kill any of the others.

But it was the sight of the people that most caught Randolph's attention. Everywhere he looked, people in white robes walked or sat or petted the wild animals. Some of them had books and were reading avidly while some were engaged in archery and other sports. Others sat in groups and seemed to be deep in conversation. Still others had gone off in mixed pairs, and could be seen holding hands, kissing and even ...

Randolph emitted a short sigh. He had never ventured to think that Heaven could be *this* good. And everything, everybody was so beautiful.

He began to walk down into the valley, his heart beating ever faster with rapt pleasure. He could be happy here, he thought. Whatever strange lusts had caused him to kill and maim while he'd lived on earth, and had thus paved his way to Hell, they seemed to have disappeared completely the second he'd walked through the great gates. He could live here forever in eternal bliss, and would never have to return to the horror that was Hell ...

He stopped himself. What was he thinking? Satan had warned him about this, had told him not to be tempted by anything he saw. He had a great future in Hell. There was no need for him even to contemplate ...

"Hello!" someone said.

Randolph looked and found himself facing a girl of perhaps twenty or twenty one. If anything, she was even more beautiful than the one he'd met at the gate, and she was talking to him. "You're new here, aren't you?" she said.

"Er, yes," admitted Randolph awkwardly. He knew that, looking the way he did, he must have stood out like a sore thumb here in Heaven. The girl, though, didn't seem to mind. She took a step closer to him and grasped his hand. "Come on!" she offered. "Let's enjoy each

other's body," and she released the shoulder straps of her robe and let it fall away.

Randolph groaned. Looking about him, he saw that several couples were already 'enjoying each other's body' and that nobody was apparently taking any notice. The girl before him was naked and beautiful, and seemed to be offering herself to him on a platter, but Satan's words rang in his head. "Do not be tempted by what you see there!"

"I ... I'm sorry!" he said, pulling his hand free of the girl's grip. "I can't. I'd really love to – (God, would I love to! How long has it been?) – but I have to go. I have to find God."

The girl frowned at him. "There's nothing to be ashamed of," she said. "Love is given and accepted here freely." She moved to take his hand again, but he avoided her.

"I'm sorry!" he said, backing off and moving away.

Randolph, you idiot! he told himself, after he'd taken no more than a dozen steps. If you'd met her on earth, you'd probably have cut out her heart. If you'd come across her in Hell, you'd have burned her in a furnace and thrown her in acid. But this is Heaven. What's stopping you?

Satan!

The Lord of the Flies had said that He didn't have much power in Heaven, but that didn't mean he couldn't just snap His fingers and have Randolph back down in the hottest hole Hell could provide. But on the other hand – could it have only been a bluff?

He spun around, ready to race back into the girl's arms, but saw that she had found someone else to her liking and was busy 'enjoying his body' on the grass. With a mild curse, which was the best he could think of at the time, he turned and continued down into the valley.

He travelled for two hours before he came to the river and the bridge that crossed it. People were swimming and playing in the water, their robes discarded on the riverbank. Randolph wanted to join them, and almost did, not to swim but to feel cool water on his skin once more. But then he thought again of the things Satan could do to him, and he crossed the bridge instead. An old man was standing on it, looking down at the swimmers, and Randolph asked him where he might find the Creator. Following the directions he was given he came, about an hour later, to a splendid palace.

The palace appeared to be Greek in style, with tall doric pillars and a high doorway. The doors stood open, so Randolph entered, getting more directions from an angel (complete with wings). Thus did he arrive at the doors to the Hall of the Creator, Lord God Over All Things (except Hell, Randolph thought).

The doors, fabulously crafted from gold and depicting the creation of the world from genesis, swung open before him. "Alex Martin Randolph!" a voice announced from within, "Messenger of Lucifer, the Rebellious Angel, also known as Satan!"

Randolph entered uncertainly, walked past the gathered hosts of saints and angels, and stood at the foot of the Throne of God. The hall and the beings that dwelt in it were beyond description. Just as Randolph had seen things in Hell that were so horrible, no words could express them, so he now saw things in Heaven. Here, however, it was beauty, not horror, that left him short.

God appeared, as Satan had done, to be a man. His hair was white, as was His beard, but there was no sense of oldness about Him. Rather, He seemed to be timeless, older than the oldest stars, yet still not old. With a smile, He rose from His throne and said, "Welcome, Alex. Welcome to Heaven!"

Randolph could only nod stupidly, the thought racing through his brain that this was the one who had created him, this was the one who had *made* him. He could not have realised it, but he was suffering a sort of culture shock right then, unprepared as he had been to look upon the glories of eternal love and happiness.

"You have a message from the angel, Lucifer?" the Creator said, and a tall angel nearby snorted at the name, his wings flapping. Randolph realised that God had His hand out, and hurriedly placed the sealed envelope in it. The Creator tore it open and pulled out the

small slip of paper it contained. The angels and saints fell silent, waiting to hear what their arch-foe had to say.

"Is it a letter of surrender in the Great War Between Good And Evil?" the tall angel asked finally.

"No, Gabriel," God said with a smile. "It will be a while yet before we get that. An eternity perhaps. No, it says 'Knight to queen's bishop two. Check!'"

The saints and angels looked at each other and some of them grumbled unhappily.

"Bring the board!" cried Gabriel, and immediately two small figures that looked like twin cupids appeared, pushing a trolley on which sat a chess board with pieces cast in gold and carved in ebony. Randolph looked at it, uncomprehending. Had he been sent from Hell to Heaven for this?

Gabriel stepped forward and made the move dictated by Satan's message, placing the black knight in a position where it checked the gold king. The angel's wings were twitching as he looked back up to the Creator. "A good move, though I say it myself!" he stated curtly.

God looked down from His throne and studied the new positions on the board, then turned to Randolph. "If you see your Master again, tell him I thank Him and that I will study it and inform Him presently of my return move." His attention then shifted back to the board.

Randolph nodded dumbly, though no-one was looking at him now, and turned to leave. So this was how it was, was it? This was the Ultimate Reality, God and the devil playing long distance chess between Heaven and Hell! He felt a deep depression begin to sink down upon him.

He walked back through the valley of Heaven the way he had come, tempted again by the cool water and the beautiful women and the lush fruit that grew on the exotic trees. The temptation seemed less this time, for he was deep in thought. He was in the Heavenly Kingdom and, even if God did spend His time doing the trivial things it appeared, there was still a lot to be said for the place. But if he decided to stay and Satan somehow got him back ... the consequences did not even bear thinking about.

But he had completed the quest Satan had set for him. Surely the Lord of the Flies would be satisfied and would reward him accordingly, as He'd said he would. A place where he could enjoy food, sleep and women, and know that his thoughts and urges were his own, that they were not 'beautified' before he even had a chance to think and feel them. That was the one thing, he realised now, that bothered him about Heaven.

He decided to return to Hell. Satan had, after all, apparently outwitted God at chess, which didn't say much for God in the long run. Maybe a time would come when it would be advantageous to be on the side of the demons. And the Great Deceiver had said that he, Randolph, had a great future ahead of him. Yes, he would do it. He would return to Hell!

He passed again through the great gateway, going outward this time and leaving Heaven behind, and sought for the spot at which he'd first arrived. The old men and the girl were nowhere in sight, not that Randolph cared now. If things went right, he would have no end of beauties just like her begging for his pleasure, anything just for a few minutes away from the suffering of Hell. He found the spot, and was suddenly falling ...

... And then he was back in the Devil's "office", again overlooking Manhattan.

"The prodigal son returns!" Satan spoke, lowering the copy of the New York Times that he'd been reading. "And did you deliver my

message?"

Randolph nodded and explained what had happened and what God had said to him just before he'd left. Satan banged a tight fist down on the desk before Him. "I knew it!" He said triumphantly. "I have Him stumped!" Then He turned a critical eye back to where Randolph still stood. "Why did you come back?" He asked. "You could have stayed in Heaven. I cannot reach in there, and they're not the type to throw you out once you've gotten past the gates."

Randolph felt an invisible third foot, one he hadn't known he had, kick him hard. Fool! Of course Satan couldn't have gotten to him there. Thoughts of the girl who had propositioned him and the cool water of the river flitted across the forefront of his mind. Why hadn't he stayed ... ?

"I ... didn't like it there!" he said. He could think of nothing else to explain his return.

Satan smiled. "I take it you weren't tempted, then?" Randolph shook his head.

"What would you say," the Devil asked, "if I told you that I sent you there to test you? And that you passed all the tests with flying colours? Would it please you to know that?"

Randolph's thoughts brightened. "You mean ... ?"

"You're moving up in the world, my boy," Satan exclaimed. "I'm putting you in charge of that level we talked about, the one with all the comforts of Heaven – blast the place to a billion fragments – but with all the –" he waved his hands in the air, "– atmosphere, of good old Hell. If you work hard, I think you could obtain demon status before too long."

"Me? A demon?" Randolph was flabbergasted. He hadn't known you could get promoted from human to demon. He had made the right choice after all. "I won't let you down!" he promised, as Satan led him over to the elevator and pressed for the doors to open.

"I know you won't, Randolph, I know you won't," said Satan, patting him heartily on the back while at the same time puffing on His cigar. The double doors slid open and Randolph entered the elevator. The last thing he saw as they closed was the Demonmaster waving happily to him in further congratulations.

It was only when the lift began to descend that Randolph remembered the demoness and the threat she had made on the way up. With a start, he turned, but found to his relief that the lift operator this time was a full sized male demon who was paying not the slightest attention to his human passenger. Randolph relaxed as the numbers flitted by on the indicator and almost cried out for joy when level seven eight one two came and went. Babroth would have a long stint at standing in for him, he thought. The next time they met, Randolph himself would probably be a demon also. He'd have to remember to do something horrible to Himmler ...

The elevator stopped at level twelve thousand, nine hundred and eighty six. The doors slid back and Randolph stepped out into his own kind of paradise – and the skin was immediately burned off him.

Something was shoved into his heat-flayed hand – a firewhip! He turned desperately to face the demon in the elevator. "Wait! There's been a mistake! This place is ten times hotter than where I was. Satan said ..."

"He told me to tell you He lied," the demon grunted, as the doors began to close. "And He doesn't make mistakes!"

From somewhere far, far above, Satan's laughter echoed loud. ❑

David William Sheridan was born in Drogheda, Ireland, in 1967. Posessed from an early age with a desire to become an astrophysicist, he instead ended up slaughtering cattle in a Dublin abbatoir. After four years of this, a vet broke his nose and he left for hospital treatment – and never went back. His body is a mass of scars, but he has enough fingers still operating to work a keyboard, which is what he has spent most of the last year doing. Someday, he even hopes to make a living at it. Hobbies include bodybuilding, chess, and a pussycat named Betelgeuse.

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REVIEWS

Editors: Please send your magazines or books for review to the editorial address. All reviews are by Chris Reed.

Magazines

ACRONOS, **Christian Vallini, Sitio de Montevideo 1825, CP: 1824, Lanus Este, Buenos Aires, Argentina. Vol 2, #2: A5, 104pp.**

One of a number of Spanish-language magazines produced by SF aficionados in Latin America, *Acronos* is a handsomely presented home production with some good fiction in the form of stories by Argentinian writers and translations of obscure 1950s US pulp writers. There is a certain dated feel to the magazine, a sad reflection of how long it takes new developments in SF to be translated for the Spanish-speaking audience, if at all. As with the Polish material featured later in this section, what is communicated most strongly is a keenness and enthusiasm for the genre, a commitment to bridging the gap betwen audiences in different countries. ❑

EDGE DETECTOR, **Glenn Grant, 1850 Lincoln Ave #803, Montreal, Quebec, H3H 1H4, Canada, #2: A4, 36pp, $2:50.**

Before you even open this magazine, the girl in the *Tiffany* t-shirt going Rambo through a shopping mall on Chaz Vincent's wrap-around cover sets the pace for the second issue of this Canadian magazine. The young pretender to the throne of *New Pathways* in the US, *Edge Detector* pulls in some of the same names and adds its own dose of sparkle. Keith Brooke, Hakim Bey and Greg Evason are among those who contribute in this issue, though top of the pops is "Marbleye In Midnight Black" by Michael Cobley, a hybrid of cyberpunk decay and the traditional dual personality horror story. The lingering influence of *New Pathways* is still evident in the design and presentation of *Edge Detector*, but while the former magazine has lately opted for squeaky clean production and cine-clip overkill, the latter retains the raw edge necessary to push back the boundaries of modern SF. ❑

NEW VISIONS, **Adrian Hodges, 3 Ashfield Close, Bishops Cleeve, Cheltenham, Glos GL52 4LG. #1: A4, 36pp, £1:25.**

A fresh new offering and welcome addition to the

British small press. Kicking the magazine off to a good start is Dave Cunliffe, editor of *Global Tapestry Journal* and typesetter for *New Visions* as well. His "Burnley: Civil War Zone" is an excerpt from the novel *Captain Jill*, from which "Sexscore Games" in *BBR* #9 was also drawn. In a familiar near-future of riot and civil war, Captain Jill Shaw spearheads a revolutionary movement which presses for autonomy for the counties of northern England and the rejection of London and southern values. There are traces of Luddism as the Lancashire Liberation Front re-establishes the operation of bridleways and canals, whilst cockney troops and collaborators are herded into empty football stadiums and shopping precincts. Quietly menacing below the surface, Cunliffe's story sets the standard for the rest of the fiction.

John Light plays safe and treads familiar themes in "Biocide" and "Second Opinion", as does Dave W. Hughes in "Chance Meeting". The magazine comes to life again with Kevin Lyons' article "Voices from the Ghetto – the Public Image of Science Fiction". Well-researched and hard hitting, Kevin goes for the throat when he assesses the damage done to science fiction by the consumer public's meek and unquestioning acceptance of what the media men choose to force feed them.

Backing this all up is a fine selection of poetry from the likes of Dave Hughes, John Francis Haines and D.A. Warne, plus plenty of illustrations and artwork by Jouni Waarakangas, Simon King and Andy Watkins. Editor Adrian Hodges makes full use of the large-page format, and the magazine has the immediate advantage bestowed by the typeset quality print. A fine first issue, and I look forward to future offerings. ❑

SPACE & TIME, **Gordon Linzner, 138 W. 70th Street (4B), New York 10023-4432 USA. #76: A5, 120pp, $5.**

Space & Time has established itself with a reputation for a full package of solid and well-plotted stories, as I've never failed to mention in reviews of previous issues. It is disappointing therefore, to find that several of the opening shots fall seriously below the mark this time around. Danith McPherson's "The Universe Seen as a Floating Orange Rind" is a long and tedious account of thirty-one-year-old Albert Wren, who is sent away by his long-suffering mother to live with his eccentric Aunt Sabrina. There he is mistaken for his supposedly long-dead brother, and recruited as Earth reporter for the extraterrestrial organisation the Foundation for the Research of Semi-Civilised Species. Much of the story's weakness lies in its irritating attempts at humour, though I hope that's only due to a transAtlantic culture gap.

The same also applies of "You Could Look It Up" by A. David Sydney, which is equally tedious and not very funny in its chronicle of an alien race infesting a man's nose prior to invading the world, and his repeated trips to the doctor for the bulbous nasal protrusion they cause. S.C. Virtes plays safe with an 'inquisitive-sorceror's-apprentice-gets-his-comeuppance' tale in "Blank Space", whilst "The Alchemist, Becalmed at Sea, Weeps", by Jeffrey Ford, is a pedestrian philosophical quest fulfilment story.

It is only half way through the magazine, and 60 pages is a long time to wait, that this issue starts serving up the goods. "Keeping the Border" by Peni Griffin is an account of a peace-keeping court trial in an off-world border territory. There are few surprises in the plot, but the story is well-crafted and presented nonetheless. Kurt Hyatt's "Sandwomen" packs more of a punch, also set off-world but detailing the attempts of a female-led mercenary team, seeking to capture native women in the desert to sell to the deprived males who inhabit the cities; Susan Wigg's "Minotaur" is another well-written story of a murderer installing himself as the beneficiary of a religious sect's human sacrifices. Closing the show, John & Traci Salonia's "Homunculus" describes an alchemist's repeated attempts to create his dream woman, each time to be foiled by her mortal weakness.

All in all, a rather disappointing issue compared with the high standard to be expected from this magazine, but hopefully this is just a hiccup and issue #77 will see *Space & Time* back on course again. ❑

THE STYGIAN DREAMHOUSE, **Mark Samuels, 55 Brasted Close, Peak Hill, Sydenham, London SE26 4LT. #1: A5, 36pp, £1:25.**

With a little help from his friends, to coin a phrase, Mark Samuels has produced this premier issue with a very good line-up of contributions from D.F. Lewis, Peter Jeffery, Mark himself and his brother Stephen. Although he declares his editorial tastes to be quite broad, there is in this issue more than a passing sensation of homage to the grand old masters of the horror genre. The stories by Lewis, Jeffery and both Samuels are all traditional in style, from the journal-entry narration of Stephen's "Before God" to the transformation of a young horror writer into his visonary hero in Mark's "Metempsychosis". The artwork and illustrations contribute to this sensation, especially the Usher-like edifice on the front cover and Desmond Knight's bizarre and grotesque photo-montages within.

Slightly out of place then in these Lovecraftian surroundings is the highlight of the magazine, Simon Clark's superb "Howls from a Blinding Curve", about a small-time rock band lost in the backwoods of Scotland who get caught up in occultism and the second coming, not of Christ, but of Hendrix. ❑

News and Comment

CONCATENATION, **Jonathan Cowie, 44 Brook Street, Erith, Kent DA8 1JQ. #3: A4, 36pp, free for large SAE.**

Picked up a copy of this at the Iconoclasm convention in June this year, where it was being freely distributed. Produced for the British SF community, both professional and fan, the magazine is financed by the sale of advertising, to judge from some of the heavyweight publishers displaying their wares within. The production, though not typeset, is slick and glossy, with plenty of illustrations and photographs. The whole range of science and science fiction is covered, weighted too much towards the former for my liking in this issue, though that is the influence of guest editor Graham Connor. The magazine carries articles on recent scientific developments of interest to the SF world, such as the Phobos and Giotto space probe missions, and the development of superconductors. New books are also reviewed, as well as recent film and video releases and reports from conventions. Interesting and stimulating, and a freebie to boot, it's worth getting hold of. ❑

SCIENCE FICTION GUIDE, **Charles Platt, 594 Broadway (room 1208), New York, Ny 10012, USA. #13: A5, 20pp, $2:50.**

Most UK readers will know of Charles Platt from his column in *Interzone*. On his own patch, however, he is much less restrained, and lets fly with healthy irreverence. No writer with the slightest hint of an ego is safe, being subjected to scathing exposure especially where commercialism and sell-out are concerned. Platt is a crusader for those who are breaking new ground, like Laidlaw, Blumlein and Sladek, but his arguments are backed up with solid fact. There are contributions on the sorry state of the art from Marc Laidlaw, Paul Di Filippo and Rudy Rucker as well, all intelligent and well-argued. *Science Fiction Guide* is seriously opinionated and a damn good read. You know it makes sense. ❑

SHARK TACTICS, **Mike Cobley, 18 Athole Gardens, Hillhead, Glasgow G12 9BA. #6: A5, 4pp, 20p.**

Mike Cobley's short but sharp broadsheet returns with an incisive and well-informed overview of the sad state of SF publishing in the UK, backed up by *The Jingopunk Manifesto*, a response to, amongst others, the comments made in Matthew Dickens' letter in *BBR* #12. No punches pulled in the reviews section either, this time taking on W.T. Quick's *Dreams of Flesh and Sand*. My money's on Mike Cobley and Kevin Lyons as the Tag Team to take on all comers – any challengers? ❑

Media

FLICKERS'N'FRAMES, **John Peters, 299 Southway Drive, Southway, Plymouth, Devon PL6 6QN. #6: A4, 10pp, 70p.**

I'd heard a lot about *Flickers'n'Frames*, but only managed to lay my hands on a copy at the NSFA stall at Iconoclasm in June. This is the Summer 89 issue, but although the news and reviews are a bit out of date by now, they make interesting reading nonetheless. John Peters has a very distinctive and easy-to-read style, packing in stacks of information whilst maintaining a cracking pace. Behind the scenes scam on *Batman*, *Roger Rabbit*, *Munchausen* and *Nightbreed* is backed up by book and video reviews and part one of an informative and friendly interview with Adrian Cole. Highly recommended. ❑

Collections

THE BOOK OF FROG, **by Jeff VanderMeer, from The Ministry of Whimsy, 7701 SW 7th Place, Gainesville, FL 32607 USA. A5, 56pp, $4.**

The Book of Frog is a collection of stories centring around the frog motif. Jeff uses his wit and imagination to full force, and comes up with a whole range of styles and situations – some more implausible than others – in which to ply his art. As can be expected from a subject such as this and a writer such as VanderMeer, humour abounds, from the dark variety of "At Least It Wasn't Another Chronicle of Someone Slowly Going Insane", a dark picture of what happens when small tree frogs overrun a rain forest, to the full-speed lunacy of "A Cracked Ferry Tail", a story of the princess-meets-a-frog variety, with a difference. More to my taste though were the stories of more serious intent, such as the horror of the secret life of

Mardi Gras revealed in "The Game of Lost and Found", the wry irony of "The Colour of Chance Is Green", or the despair and primitive hopelessness of "El Toque de Midas". Obviously some of the stories work better than others, and the frog motif and the humour may be slightly forced at times, but the collection works well and should be a must for anyone looking for something that little bit out of the ordinary. ❑

Books

THE FACELESS TAROT **by Keith Seddon and Jocelyn Almond, from Dunscaith Publishing Ltd, 28 West Lodge Avenue, London W3 9SF. ISBN 1-871685-01-X. A5, 149pp perfect bound, £3:95.**

Two thousand years on from the Great Destruction of twentieth century civilisation, North Wales has reverted to a new superstitious and magic-infested Dark Ages. A young and moody magician named Eliseus Sebedeus is called upon by the Grim Reaper to identify a Law-breaker who is preventing the dead from passing to the Otherworld. Ten cards missing from Sebedeus' tarot pack are the key to the quest, which by a process of elimination will reveal the identity of the tenth and faceless card that hides the image of the Law-breaker.

The unravelling of the tale is competently handled, taking Sebedeus through various episodes in both this and the otherworld before the final climax of the identification and apprehension of the Law-breaker. Along the way, Sebedeus must identify each missing card in succession, before progressing to the next. Unfortunately, the authors fail to capitalise on the narrative opportunities offered to them by this device. The story reads as though the individual episodes exist merely as bridges to their successors, instead of adding further depth and texture to the fabric of the novel in their own right. As a result, the reader is left with the unfortunate impression that he can skip over the middle half of the novel without losing the thread of the story. In effect, the story would read just as well if only two cards needed to be identified instead of ten.

A possible explanation for the plot's loss of focus is the emphasis placed on tarot law. Though no doubt of interest to those inclined that way, to the layman the descriptions and significance placed on a knowledge of the cards become quickly overbearing. There are inconsistencies of character too, such as the hero's undying love for his recently deceased lover one minute, replaced by his

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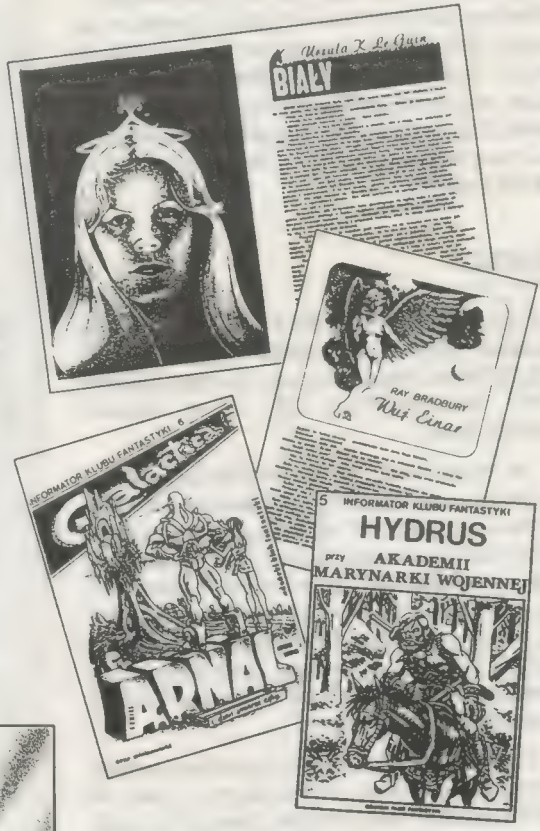
Bidding to host the 1993 Eurocon are the members of the Gdanski Klub Fantastyki (GKF), the Science Fiction Club of Gdansk.

Founded in 1987 as a collection of twelve SF clubs, the GKF holds meetings, publishes several magazines, sells SF books and magazines, lends books and videotapes from its library, and holds the annual Nordcon convention. From 30 November to 3 December 1989 the club is hosting the Polish National SF Convention, Polcon, at which the Guests of Honour include Brian Aldiss and Charles Brown of *Locus*.

Although the magazines produced by GKF are mostly in Polish, some special editions are in English. They feature fiction by Polish writers, as well as translations of stories



by popular British and American authors. The artwork and illustrations are produced by a special section of the GKF, which also holds its own exhibitions of material.

The GKF is keen to communicate with other SF organisations and individuals outside Poland, and is interested in swapping magazines, books, artwork and other material, in exchange for similar items from around the world. If you want to learn more about the GKF and Polish SF, and want to help SF fandom beome a truly world-wide community, write to:

Krzysztof Papierkowski, President, Gdanski Klub Fantastyki, ul. Chylonska 191, 81-007 Gdynia, Poland. ❑

desire to seduce the first available young girl the next. Faults such as these should really have been picked up at the editorial level, and do not assist the readability of an already weakened storyline. ❑

THE LAST DAYS OF CHRIST THE VAMPIRE **by J.G. Eccarius, from III Publishing, PO Box 8362, San Diego, CA 92102, USA. 7" x 4", 180pp perfect bound, $5:95.**

When a title like this arrives on your desk it's bound to make you sit up and take notice.

"Christ the Vampire. He was a magician in ancient Palestine. The Romans tried to kill him. Only they didn't know to drive a stake through his heart. So he has lived ever since, appearing to people who are weak. Whoever accepts his kiss gets sucked into the whole trip and becomes a mindless zombie wandering round trying to suck in the living by saying things like 'Jesus is the answer'."

A half-baked idea thought up by a high school tutor in the sleepy town of Providence, Rhode Island, is picked up by his subversive friends, who start spraypainting "Christ the Vampire Wants You" all over town. But there's more to it than meets the eye. Someone wants them run out of town, and they realise that they have suddenly stirred up something much more sinister than they realised. Christ the Vampire and his undead followers control governments across the world, and they are busy preparing the Apocalypse.

Eccarius sets out his basic treatise in a very believable fashion, ably taking on board the Catholic communion ritual, the mindless devotion of born-again Christians and their belief that adoration of Christ will promise them Eternal Life. The novel sets off at a cracking pace, alternating between the subversives in Providence and the plotting vampires. Once the outcasts hit the road, however, picking up more friends as they go, Eccarius tends to lose control of his characters. New subversives join and leave the group, but they are shallowly drawn and interchangeable – but for the name – with those they replace.

It is towards the end of the novel, when they send groups to Rome and Jerusalem to seek out and possibly kill Christ the Vampire, that Eccarius starts to trip up. His research is impeccable, but he is too keen to demonstrate his knowledge of the two cities, causing the narrative to suffer from overly intricate descriptions of the locale.

In the final scenes, the anti-vampire campaign has reached such proportions, causing widespread strikes and the firebombing of churches, that the President declares martial law and imposes a nation-wide curfew. A great crowd marches on the Pentagon, where Christ the Vampire is being protected, and finds him in a suite deep in the basement.

It's asking a bit much for the reader's belief to be suspended this far, but there are nice touches throughout the novel that more than compensate, such as the representative of Christ known as Cardinal Vlad, and the appearance of Eccarius himself as a good vampire willing to help the subversives in their campaign. ❑

LETTERS

We welcome all comments – good or bad – about *BBR*. Please send your letters to the editorial address. Any letter written to *BBR* will be assumed to be intended for publication, unless otherwise indicated by the sender. Letters may be edited or shortened for reasons of space.

Mike Ashley, 4 Thistlebank, Walderslade, Chatham, Kent ME5 8AD.

You can tell when you've started to appreciate a magazine, and that's when it turns up in the post and you mentally say "Ah, good, another issue", rather than "Oh, another of those." I've definitely started to appreciate *BBR* even though by and large it doesn't reflect my tastes in SF. I think it's because I subliminally appreciate all of the effort that goes into it and that I'm witnessing some pool of fecundity where the future hopes of SF are being spawned.

All of which sounds rather more pretentious than *BBR* deserves, so I'll cut the rest of the crap and comment on what hit me in this issue. And I must say Alfred Klosterman's illo on p.13 hit me the moment I opened the mag. An excellent illo, rather like the work that Dallas Goffin is now producing, and it made me read the story straightaway. Or rather the excerpt. This is rather tantalising. There's some wonderful imagery and potency in this. I presume the technique here is primarily for this excerpt, because I can't imagine it could be successfully sustained for a whole novel, though I have no doubt t.W-D. would give it a go. *Duet for the Devil* should be most interesting.

The other story that grabbed me in this issue was Lyle

Hopwood's "The Fathers" which is excellent and deserves a wide readership. I hope it gets picked up by the "annual best" anthologists here and abroad. Somehow it strikes me that she's showing a Californian influence already, because there sure isn't much of Yorkshire in this tale. It's the kind of thing Lucius Shepherd might write, and that's a big compliment as far as I'm concerned. I'm not surprised she's top of your poll. ❑

Simon Clark, 121 Tenter Balk Lane, Adwick-le-Street, Doncaster DN6 7EE.

Number 13: unlucky for some but not for issue #13 of *BBR*. It has to be one of the best yet. Thanks to everyone who voted for my story "Dream the Real" to make it joint first with "The Technophobe". Congratulations to Lyle Hopwood – a name I'm sure we'll see a lot more often.

I have to say now that *BBR* is not on a par with *Interzone*. It is better. (I guess that screws up my future submissions to *Interzone!)* I can imagine them using S.M. Baxter's excellent "The Space Butterflies" and Dave W. Hughes' "Dream Sequence" – which is a cracking story that should have been far longer – but I can't imagine them using "Duet for the Devil" by Randy Chandler and t. Winter-Damon. This was an amazing, gob-smacking story; hip-deep in bizarre, multi-coloured imagery that covered seemingly everything, bouncing from Lovecraft to the Book of Revelations to Clive Barker and beyond. Messrs Chandler and Damon should burn rubber, burn the midnight lamp and finish the novel. It will be essential reading for the speculative fiction reader. Last but not least Lyle Hopwood's "The Fathers". Her work is consistently good and always leaves you wanting more. One day I hope to read a novel of hers. I'm sure I won't have to wait that long. ❑

Miles Hadfield, 10 Kings Hey Drive, Churchtown, Southport, Merseyside PR9 7JB.

Thanks for the back numbers of *BBR*; I've spent all weekend reading them when I should have been doing more important things, like work. It's surprising how good small press magazines like *BBR* and *WORKS* can be; now, if only you could convince a big publisher to do an anthology, you'd win a lot of readers ... Which I suppose assumes an unlikely degree of taste on the part of the big publishers.

On the subject of the poetry debate; most of the best poems you've done weren't SF at all. I can't help thinking that poetry is too simplistic as it has manifested itself in the SF world, tending to render material that would normally seem routine into verse form – the honourable exceptions being Andy Darlington's short, sweet "After the Raid" and the poetic prose of Hakim Bey and t. Winter-Damon. SF Poetry should take what is poetic in SF and build on it.

As far as your fiction goes, I won't say it all appeals; Simon Clark's "Grave-Digger" was pulpy drivel, Ian Watson's "La Fin de Bon-Bon" somewhat throwaway; and Lyle Hopwood's "Sensonomicon" illustrated the dangers of a 'movement' like cyberpunk. Once the main stock of ideas and images have been covered as thoroughly – and as brilliantly – as these have, then it all turns stale; even the writers featured in *Mirrorshades* recognised this – quite early – and had already started to diversify; witness Greg Bear's story in that book, and his other short fiction. On the other hand, British c-p, such as Eric Brown's "Big Trouble Upstairs" or an awful lot of other stuff in *Interzone* recently, tends to be whimsical and amateurish – these are the recurring motifs, let's recycle them in a nice, twee way.

On the plus side, Lyle Hopwood's "The Fathers" was superb, reminding me, a bit, of Lucius Shepherd. Of course, when cyberpunk moves, it stops being cyberpunk; but all movements must *move*. D.F. Lewis is utterly brilliant; Don Webb is showing us all how the short-short should be done. ❑

Steve Sneyd, 4 Nowell Place, Almondbury, Huddersfield, West Yorkshire HD5 8PB.

I promised to respond to M. Pierce's stricture on my story – leaving it to you of course whether it is of interest. Obviously, I can't comment on your motives in accepting the story, and my subconscious only communicates with me via the keyboard, so what the motivation was in the primal depths I do not know.

But at a *conscious* level, I certainly did not intend to be controversial, nor did I intend to imply that the distorted relationships involved were desirable. If anything, I see the story as an elegiac piece on the ending of a certain set of hopes, which briefly localised time/spacewise in the late 60s in the UK and elsewhere in the West. The "moral" (though I dislike the word, I have to use it) is that the compromising of hope does not bring the fulfilment imagined, but a doppelganger parody of it. The particular "power" relationship involved is used because, partly, of its role, as M. Pierce mentions, throughout traditional areas of magical belief, and partly because, in the same elegiac sense, hopes of sexual liberation in an equal, mutually fulfilling sense are in many ways another casualty

of the 80s.

Believe me, I am not objecting to M. Pierce's opinion – I would have no right to – if the piece came across as an amoral attempt at stirring controversy, then that is my failure as a writer, and my attempts to avoid any use of titillating language, to objectify terminology, and so on were another casualty. But I do feel that, if large areas of traditional (and contemporary) reality/magic must become taboo for the "serious writer", the *Sun/Sunday Sport* ethos wins by default, and the "new censorship" has decisively silenced a completely irrelevant target, while Murdoch and Co. go on laughing all the way to the bank. ❑

Alan Garside, 23 Marton Grove, Reddish, Stockport SK4 5JQ.

Thanks for *BBR* #13. A very good issue this one, containing the very best Ian Watson story I have read in the small press and, best of all, "Moon Piece" by Hakim Bey. There was nothing that disappointed. I must say that the letters page surprised me most by virtually ignoring most of Matthew Dickens' comments in the previous issue. Probably the best thing – it being such nonsense – but a surprise all the same. It struck me also that M. Pierce should have been more reluctant to enjoy Steve Sneyd's "Taken for a Ride" because of its utter contempt for the victim. I enclose my subscription and look forward to future issues. ❑

Christian Vallini, Sitio de Montevideo 1825, CP: 1824, Lanus Este, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

I finished *BBR* #13 reading. Do you want to know my opinions? OK. I liked very much the whole presentation – it's the first time I've got an English mag of this kind.

"The Space Butterflies" was almost the best for me but I would have carried on another sort of end. Exotic ambient and scenes are a good supply for the story. I liked and hope to know more S.M. Baxter stories.

"Duet for the Devil" is so strange, well, I'd say it's a wild story. A really wild one due to its treatment. Although it keeps on some relation with Splatterpunk, it's a different style I didn't see in Spector or Skipp stories. "Neo-Baudelairian Cyber-Sade"? It sounds funny!

Very good Dave Hughes' story! Great! About "The Last Laugh" I couldn't say much because I didn't understand the author's boundary. Excuse me but the matter is that I'm still a newcomer to England SF, you know, here they're still with Moorcock and Bayley and some of New Wave authors. Here we don't know very much your new authors.

My congratulations for "Root Canal Therapy" by Ian Watson. He's a special writer. Fans in my country liked *The Embedding* and *The Garden of Delights* specially.

It was pleasant to enjoy "Moonpiece: The Monologues". It's an odd piece of writing. Lyle Hopwood's story is good enough to have made me happy as I read it. It was a strange sensation for me reading a tale written in English with Latin names!

Illustrations: excellent. If I say the best of them is Dallas Goffin I'd be in a mistake because I'd forget Klosterman ... and David Transue! Well, every one of them are high quality artists.

Oh, you've got to excuse me please if this seems a very serious and formal letter, but as I'm 17 got many errors. In spite of this I see all the effort contained in *BBR* that's why I send you my best felicitations! Good luck!

(Christian Vallini is editor of ACRONOS *magazine, and found out about* BBR *through the advert in* INTERZONE. *His magazine is reviewed on page 56. A future issue of* ACRONOS *will contain a translation of S.M. Baxter's "The Space Butterflies".)* ❑

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